

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
December 14, 2014
Theme: Time
Sermon: Wild Reversal

First Advent Reading - Isaiah 40: 1-11 “God’s People Are Comforted”

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid [...]

A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’

A voice says, ‘Cry out!’
And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
‘Here is your God!’
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Second Advent Reading: Luke 1:46-55

Mary's Song of Praise (The Magnificat)

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Sermon: Wild Reversal

A voice cries out in the wilderness:
prepare the way of the LORD.

A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

When the poor, unwed pregnant teenager we call Mary learns she is pregnant with a holy child, she cries out a rebellious and triumphant song.

[God] has brought down the powerful
and lifted up the lowly;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
This baby is turning Mary's whole world upside down—and that is just the beginning.
Mary cries out about God creating a new world order,
a total reversal of the status quo:

a world where the hungry are filled,
the rich are emptied,
the powerful are toppled
and the lowly raised high.

A wild, wild reversal.
Yes, as one of my colleagues wrote:

“He was a THUG
who intentionally tried to disrupt society,
who had no respect for other people’s property
and caused havoc to honest businessmen,
whose followers were hoodlums
who attacked police with a deadly weapon,
who disobeyed the authorities
and got what was coming to him.
Even so, I’m still celebrating Jesus Christ’s birth this Christmas.”
– Rev. Bob Janis-Dillon

I hope that in the last two weeks you have been reading and listening to the news, learning all you can from the tragic and complex stories and the lives lost and the injustices perpetuated. Racism and oppression and injustice are still very alive in America.

I know we all have different experiences and understandings of race in America. And I can imagine that many folks would rather not think about such painful issues in the lead up to Christmas. Can’t we just sing carols and eat cookies? Can’t we focus on gift-giving and fun times? And yet:

Hate is strong and
mocks the song of
peace on earth, goodwill to men.

The voices cry out in the wilderness.
And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’

Theologian Karl Barth has been paraphrased as saying that a good minister preaches with his Bible in one hand, and his newspaper in the other.¹ These days it is not just newspapers, but social media: as one colleague put it, now we should have our Bible in one hand and our twitter account in the other.

¹ More accurate quote is, according to Time magazine, 1963: “Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.'”

Please walk in the wilderness with me.

Even though: all I have to give you is stories.

My first conscious racialized memory: I remember observing my white classroom teacher. She yelled a lot, but there was one boy who got yelled at the most, many times every day. I remember him being forced to stand still in a corner, again and again. I don't know why—I don't remember him misbehaving. But I do remember that he was the darkest-skinned black boy in the class, and I knew, without even having to think about it, that that was why the teacher hated him. It was kindergarten, and we were five.

A voice cries out in the wilderness.

Years ago I knew a kind of immature young man in his 20s, living in Cambridge, who lost his house key. Instead of getting a new key right away from his landlord, he just climbed in and out of his kitchen window for more than a week. No one called the police. He was white.

When Henry Louis Gates jiggled the stuck lock on his very own front door, also in Cambridge, someone called the police, and the police arrested him, on his very own porch, even after he showed ID proving it was his home. Professor Gates is black.

Prepare the way of the LORD.

A few years ago a friend of mine, a white woman, was pulled over by a police officer. Her taillight was out. The officer asked for her license and registration, and spent a long time in his car with it. When he returned to her car window he asked, "Are you a terrorist?" My friend said no, why would he ask that?

The police officer told her to come out of her car, and over to his vehicle and look at what his computer had pulled up when he ran her license. Her face and license number had come up on the screen with two words across the bottom: "Terrorist Watch."

And then they laughed together at such a ludicrous thing, and he let her go back to her car and drive away.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

In Times Square in New York City, a woman named Chaumtoli Huq was waiting on the sidewalk for her husband and children to finish using a restroom inside. She was carrying a New York Public Library tote-bag with snacks in it; her family was heading to a picnic. She is Bangladeshi-American, and was wearing a traditional South Asian tunic.

A police officer came over and told her to move along, she was blocking the sidewalk. She moved closer to the building, leaving the walkway clear, explaining she was waiting for her family.

The police officers grabbed her,
flipped her,
pulled her arms up behind her,
cuffed her,
arrested her,
and dragged her away with such force her shoe was twisted off and left in the street.

She yelled to bystanders to tell her family what happened to her.

The police officers told her:
“Shut your mouth.
You are our prisoner now.”

This all happened within the few minutes her husband and children were using the bathroom. Chaumtoli Huq was in custody for nine hours.

She was charged with obstruction of governmental administration, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.

The charges were dropped. But Huq is a lawyer...and has opened a federal lawsuit against the NYPD for aggressive over-policing people of color.

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low.*

A friend of mine works as a consultant for pharmaceutical companies, leading focus groups to test out the marketing campaigns for new drugs.

Now this one pharma company had been working on a new advertising campaign for the past couple of months, and were ready to test it out this month.

The goal of this advertising campaign was to present this new drug as strong...but safe. Powerful...but trustworthy. Effective...but gentle.

(Pretty much like all medication—I doubt any pharma company wants its drugs to be seen as ineffective yet dangerous.)

So what sort of image do you think they went with to give that impression?

Yes. Their advertisements leaned heavily on images of police officers.

My consultant friend asked whether they thought that was a good idea given current events...but the firm had the advertisements ready, many people had approved them, and the company was ready to go ahead with the focus groups.

The focus groups did not go well.

In one, a doctor stood up, an African-American woman. She was hurt and angry. She said, "I don't understand *why*

anyone
would think this is a good idea."

*The uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

My brother-in-law, a skinny white guy, had relocated, and was having a hard time getting a job in his preferred field, federal park ranger, a job he had loved. He thought he'd switch to another related field, police officer.

He had this rosy image of himself teaching the D.A.R.E. anti-drug program in the schools.

When he got on the job he was told his assignment was to give speeding tickets.

That is not an easy job. American gun control laws—or lack thereof—mean that anyone could be armed with a deadly weapon. The US has the highest rate of private gun ownership in the world. A far second is Yemen. And so police are trained to live in fear of the very people they are called to protect and serve. Militarized, many say. Fear and power are a deadly mix, for everyone, both police and citizens.

It was too much for my brother-in-law. Two weeks on the job, he quit. I remember him saying he just couldn't stand how much people hated him. When he walked over to their car windows, he could see: They hated him...they really, really hated him.

*A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.'*

Little Ralphie from the movie "A Christmas Story" said all he wanted for Christmas was an official Red Ryder, carbine action, 200 shot range air rifle. It looks just like a real gun. His mother said, "No, you'll shoot your eye out." But then he does get the gun from his dad, best Christmas present ever. The young white boy happily plays with the gun, yet no police are called and nobody shoots him. I guess that would be a very different movie.

Tamir Rice was a twelve year old black boy. He went to the park and his friend showed him his new pellet gun. It looked just like a real gun. Someone near the park called the police. The police showed up, driving their car within ten feet of the kids. They shouted at Tamir to put his hands up. But he wasn't fast enough, or maybe he wasn't grown-up enough to realize what was happening was real. Within two seconds, one of the police officers exited his car and shot Tamir in the chest. We have video. Two seconds:

1, 2.

Voices are crying out.

In the wilderness.

In the parks.

On the streets.

In protest.

Eric Garner, a black man, was standing on the sidewalk when he was approached by police officers. Apparently Eric Garner had been known in the past to perpetuate the crime of selling single loose cigarettes from a pack.

These are Eric Garner's last words, as captured on video:

For what? Every time you see me, you want to mess with me. I'm tired of it. It stops today. Why would you...? Everyone standing here will tell you I didn't do nothing. I did not sell nothing. Because every time you see me, you want to harass me. You want to stop me (garbled) Selling cigarettes. I'm minding my business, officer, I'm minding my business. Please just leave me alone. I told you the last time, please just leave me alone.

Please please, don't touch me.

Do not touch me.

I can't breathe.

Silence

One colleague in St. Louis wrote that she had heard stories of protesters standing face to face with police, and police officers softly saying, "Keep doing what you're doing."

Peaceful protest, met with humble and gentle power.
It is possible.

One young black boy, the same age as Tamir Rice, attended a protest, holding a sign that said, “Free hugs.”

A white police officer came up to him, shook his hand, talked with him.
And they hugged, as the boy cried.

Isaiah describes the greatest might and power humans can imagine—divine strength:

See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;

But then Isaiah describes how God will use that power:

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

The greatest strength.
The gentlest touch.
A whisper.
A hug.
Signs of hope in the wilderness.
A twisted path that may yet be laid straight
The road to a wild reversal.

Prepare ye, the way of the Lord.

I pray:

Comfort, O comfort my people, O God.
Speak tenderly to us,
and cry with us.
Walk with us in the wilderness.

Promise us: that
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Reveal glory and goodness and grace to us,
And let all people see it together.

Give us a voice, a chime, a chant sublime,
Of peace on earth, goodwill to all.
Meet our hopes and fears of all the years
With the possibility of joy and love
even when all seems lost.

And when we don't know what to do,
Help us listen,
help us change,
Help us be allies,
help us be humble,
help us be hopeful.

Amen.

Citations and More Reading:

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“White Fragility” by Robin DiAngelo