

The Right Time

Isaiah 60: 17-22 (*The Message*)

[Lent 3, 2 April 2014, Augsburg College Chapel]

I'm co-teaching the senior honors seminar this semester with Professor Tim Pippert – a course that is exploring the dynamics of wealth and income inequality by studying those experiencing homelessness, on the one extreme, and those living with extreme affluence and wealth, on the other. Earlier this semester, we witnessed the weekly housing lottery, where those experiencing homelessness stand in line at a shelter to see whether or not their names get called for a bed that night – that night during which it was 15 degrees below zero. And those whose numbers do not come up for one of the limited number of beds are sent away without a place to sleep or a meal to eat. Brutal reality – where is the promise in that? This is a problem we should be able to solve, but we have not. What does Isaiah mean, "I'll give you only the best – no hand-me-downs"? How about a bed, a meal, some dignity?

Two weeks ago Provost Karen Kaivola and I visited our Center for Global Education campus in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where we visited an indigenous village and witnessed first hand the extreme poverty and illiteracy and unbearable living conditions of the good people in that mountain village. Along with our students, we carried dirty and infected well water on our heads across difficult terrain, just as the women of the village do everyday. We sat in tin huts with families eking out a living by weaving baskets. We saw open sores and broken bones and rotting teeth with no relief in sight. A wrenching reality – where is the great tribe and strong nation in that? How about some justice and mercy and compassion?

Here, in the midst of our Lenten journeys, on the road to Jerusalem alongside of Jesus and his disciples, falling in love with God once again as we seek to grasp God's presence in our history, renewing our faith in the midst of the tensions of life in this mean time, we come upon this remarkable passage from the prophet Isaiah. A passage brimming with the promise of life abundant...

I'll give you only the best – no more hand-me-downs!

*You'll name your main street Salvation Way,
and install Praise Park at the center of town.*

All your people will live right and well...

*The runt will become a great tribe,
the weakling become a great nation.*

We're liking this – especially after this long, brutal winter and this arduous journey of faith. So, what's the pay-off? Let's get ready because here it comes...

I am God.

At the right time I'll make it happen.

Whaaat? At the right time? What do you mean, dear God, at the right time?

And here we stand, at the central intersection and tension of the life of faith, poised between God's promise and the reality of our human experience.

The right time? Who decides? When will it come? How long, O Lord, must we wait?

I believe, dear God, help my unbelief...

Hear then these wise words from 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who writes in his *The Irony of History*:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history, therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do however virtuous can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.

And here, in the midst of our Lenten journeys, we are offered a new horizon for our faith – a horizon that stretches into Kairos, God's time, and away from Chronos, our time – a horizon that offers us a wider and more expansive narrative for seeing where the life of faith leads. A horizon that leads us to be co-creators of the promise God has set before us, the promise of no hand-me-downs, of Salvation Way and Praise Park, of a country led by Peace and managed by Righteousness.

And so we will advocate for beds for those experiencing homelessness. We will volunteer to feed the hungry. We will use our education to fight for justice in our neighborhood and around the world. We will love our neighbors and fight like hell for their wellbeing. We will tell the stories of good people around the world who deserve "only the best," just like all of God's creation. And we will pray for God's kingdom, on earth as in heaven.

And we will do all of that and more because we are saved by hope, despite the evidence; we are saved by faith, even when the journey seems too burdensome; we are saved by love, when love is all we have to offer; and we are saved by forgiveness because we have so, so much to learn. And in this time – our time – we will know the right time – God's time – in which all will be made new. Thanks be to God.
Amen.