

Conflicted

Psalm 46 and “The Word Awaited,” by Kate McIlhagga

(Augsburg College Chapel, 30 November 2016, Advent 1)

I conclude my series of homilies for this fall semester with my third “C”. We began in September with the call to be convicted – held accountable for our fallen selves and called to a deep conviction to God’s work in the world. We then turned in October to the call to be concerned – Jesus’s challenge to his mother to answer “of what concern” are the needs of others and her simple call to obedience.

And here we are in these dark days of November, in this first week of Advent, the new church year, and I come reflecting on the call to be conflicted – and I imagine you think I’m going to talk about the election – and as tempting as that might be...

Instead, I am here this morning to suggest that a central theme of this Advent season is the reality that we are called to be conflicted, to live in the tensions that define the lives of God’s faithful people – people already saved by a baby in a manger, a teacher and a healer, a savior on a cross, a Christ risen indeed – and people still fallen, tempted by the urge to control our lives, to know all, to define success and truth for ourselves.

Our spiritual ancestor, Martin Luther, taught us the Latin phrase for this tension: *simul justus et peccator*, at once both saved and fallen, saint and sinner. It is a core part of our Lutheran Christian faith tradition. It names the paradox of living in the tensions. It forms us to deny the either/or demands of the world – are you for me or against me, are you conservative or liberal, I am right and you are wrong – and accept God’s claim upon us to be both/and people, navigating the complexities of life with the trust that only God has all the answers, that we are called to embrace and love our neighbors even when we disagree. And it is hard stuff, this paradoxical, tension-filled, conflicted life we are called to lead.

And here comes this delightful poem from Kate McIlhagga, a minister and member of the Iona spiritual community in Scotland until her death in 2002 – a poem that juxtaposes these two aspects of our nature. “Sometimes, I long to call words of praise to me,” she writes, “to coax them down from trees into my waiting hand.” And sometimes they come, she continues, “swift and powerful...words of challenge, fierce words of regret.” Our longing to call the word, she suggests, often leads to challenge and regret.

But “One time,” she continues, “you came, the word, Not at my call, you came to occupy a cradle, a grave, my heart, a universe. You came to unleash words of comfort, words of hope.” One time, as the Evangelist tells us, the Word became flesh and broke

into our history with words of comfort and hope and grace and truth. And there is nothing to do but hold out our empty hands and wait.

And waiting is hard, too. “Be still and know that I am God,” the Psalmist writes to the Israelites impatient with their God, tired of waiting, sure that they had been abandoned to lives of exile and slavery. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble....God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning comes...The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Be still, be still, wait, have faith – and know that I am God. Wise counsel for our Advent journeys.

So what to do while we wait, while we live in the tensions, while we are conflicted? Surely it is not to do nothing, to wait passively, to stand by and hope for the best – our God demands “active waiting,” for in the tensions, in the conflicts, are the stuff of our lives of faith in the world. We are called to be conflicted, and our God has our back!

This Advent, I am mindful that most of us are feeling more conflicted than ever. OK – just a few words about the election!! We’ve lived through a wrenching time in our history. No matter where you land on election results, all of us are feeling the pain of division, of a sense of loss of bearing, of fear for what will come, of a longing for well-being and civility and common purpose. So, maybe Advent comes at just the right time for conflicted people, maybe this liturgical season is a gift to those whose longings have been frustrated and who need to be still and know that God is God – and know that our God has a plan for us.

It begins with the Advent call to turn again to the One who calls, to embrace what preacher and theologian Frederick Buechner calls the gift and demand of a “magnificent defeat.” He writes, “Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his/hers who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy are only from God...And God is the enemy whom in one way or another all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives—our selves, our wills, our treasures.” The magnificent defeat – born in a manger, won on a cross, redeemed in an empty tomb. God’s plan for God’s people.

And then God’s conflicted people are called to pursue God’s will and work in the world. For this work, I am inspired and challenged by the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who, in a stirring sermon in the throes of the civil rights campaign, called for God’s faithful people to be tough-minded – characterized by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment – sounds a good bit like the outcomes of a liberal arts education, an Augsburg education. But he didn’t stop there. Yes, tough-minded, but at the same time, tender-hearted – not a naïve or sentimental concern for others, but a commitment to compassion and justice for all our neighbors – also core values of an Augsburg education. Tough-minded and tender-hearted – just the stuff of the

conflicted life, and as King concludes, the very nature of the God who calls us, the God who loves us, the God whose Advent in our midst we mark in the days ahead.

Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know. Be still. Be. Be God's conflicted people in the world. Be tough-minded and tender-hearted. The Word has become flesh, indeed; the Word that comes to us in a manger – the Word, full of comfort and hope and grace and truth. Blessings on your conflicted Advent journeys. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.