

“WALKING IN THE LIGHT”

a sermon on Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, and Matthew 23:
Advent 1 – November 27, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Well, the turkey has been eaten, Santa Claus has made his grand entrance ushering in the shopping season. The Egg Bowl has been played. And so now we turn out attention to the coming Feast of the Incarnation.” Even though Santa has made his grand parade entrance, in the old Christian Church, of course, it isn’t *Christmas*, just yet. It is *Advent* – our annual season of preparation and *waiting*.

But not *just* waiting. Waiting and *listening*. And the voices to which we give our attention first in Advent are the voices of the *prophets*.

Isaiah the prophet wrote, “In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.” That is our “prophetic word” for the morning.

The question is, how should we *approach* that “prophetic word?” Our tendency is to either look at it purely as “prediction” about the future, or else *dogmatically*, as though it is “polished theology.” And either way, we are missing something *important* about “the prophetic word;” namely, its *passion* – the way it captures the fears, as well as the aspirations of an oppressed people. The way it spoke (once upon a time) as a voice from the *outside* – an *objective* voice, rather than that of the King, or the high priest, in which could be heard the voice of God. The people of Israel sometimes *hated* the prophets because of what they said, but they hated them because they knew that their messages often rang true.

Abraham Heschel, a prominent Jewish scholar, puts it like this: “By insisting on the absolutely objective and supernatural nature of prophecy, dogmatic theology has disregarded the prophet’s part in the prophetic act. Stressing revelation, it has ignored the response; isolating inspiration, it has lost sight of the human situation.”

Especially when we encounter the prophetic word in this season, our tendency is to read it simply as “prediction,” which in turn was “fulfilled” in the coming of Jesus Christ. And isn’t that *nice*.

A few chapters later, Isaiah “fleshes out” his vision: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And the government will be upon his shoulder, and name

will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, prince of peace.”

We know what that means. We know that Jesus Christ is the “child” who was born. We know that Isaiah “predicted” the birth. And we are *satisfied*. In fact, we are filled with *joy* – our “word for the day” on the *fourth* Sunday of Advent, just as our word today is “hope.”

The problem is, that approach immediately takes our focus *away* from what we might call the “prophetic moment” that Dr. Heschel was describing – from the *circumstances* in which the prophet found himself, that gave *rise* to the prophecy in the first place.

And secondly, the fulfillment *envisioned* by the prophets was clearly *not* what in fact occurred in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Let me repeat that: the fulfillment *envisioned* by the prophets was clearly *not* what in fact occurred in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

That doesn’t mean that Jesus was not the fulfillment of the prophecies. It means that the prophets, like all people, had limits to their knowledge. They were “reading the times” and drawing faith conclusions about them. But even the prophetic word itself *evolved* over time, from Isaiah (an *early* prophet in Israel’s history) who “predicted” (for instance) that Jerusalem would never fall to its enemies, to Jeremiah (a later prophet), who believed that Jerusalem’s destruction would be so complete that the city would have to be rebuilt absolutely from scratch.

The truth is, many of the best and most knowledgeable interpreters of Scripture in Jesus’ day never accepted that the son of a carpenter from Galilee could be the “promised messiah,” or that the “messianic age” could exist without the Roman Empire being thrown out of Israel and Jerusalem being physically and *literally* “lifted up” as Isaiah described it.

The season of Advent is a time to *prepare* ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the coming of the “light” into the world. That preparation is a journey that begins by encountering the prophetic word.

And my point is, in order to do that we have to at least make an *attempt* to understand what it was *like* to dwell “in a land of deep darkness” – a land *without* a messiah, a land without even a *vision* of what could be, save our *remembrance* of what had *already been*. In other words, we have to enter the *world* of the prophets.

Only then will the prophetic word begin to have real meaning for us – meaning beyond the “nice” meaning that Jesus came to fulfill it.

Because you see, the real *value* of the prophetic word is not in the extent to which it has turned out to accurately predict the future. The value of the prophetic word is that *continues* to shine a bit of *light* into the dark places of life. At least, it *can* – if we can manage to get past the “outer wrappings” of the Christmas season, and discover what it is about our lives, and about the world, that still needs to *hear* that word, and that still *desperately* needs the good news of a great joy.

The prophetic word has two parts. The first part is judgment, which has to do with recognizing that our actions have consequences. We are constantly behaving as though today is all there is, and as though our personal happiness at this moment is all that really matters. The prophetic word of *judgment* is a *reminder* that the world is larger than just us, and that we live in a “context.”

The word of judgment is word against the human tendency to self-absorption, which is a rejection of God. And that isn’t just an “Old Testament” idea. Self-consumption is alive and well today, and God stands in *judgment* of it – and of *us*, to the extent that we participate in it.

But then the second part is the prophetic word of *hope*. Hope comes from looking ahead, *out* of whatever “darkness” surrounds us, *into* the light of God’s presence, and a “better day.” The prophets always, *always* continued to believe that a better day would finally come.

For Isaiah, the vision of that better day included the end of war. Their people had been at war for so long, with so many adversaries. One thing Isaiah knew for sure: the age of messiah will be an age in which swords are made into plowshares — when people *get along*, which he envisioned occurring because they are serving a *common* Master, instead of *opposing* ones. One “judge.” One “kingdom.”

As prediction, Isaiah didn’t do very well on that one — assuming that we believe we now live in the “age of the messiah.” The fact is, at no time in recorded history that I am aware of has there ever been real and total “peace” even in the Middle East, let alone all over the world.

But again, the value of the prophetic word is not in its accuracy of *prediction*. It is in the extent to which it captures the *longing* of the people, and their true and best *hopes*, in which are represented their true *spirituality*, and in which can be heard the voice of God.

And one final point about prophet word of hope. Its intended result was not “passive” waiting for God’s intervention. “O house of Jacob, come,” Isaiah wrote. “Let us walk in the light of the LORD.” The *result* of having hope, is *living* as the Source of our hope intends for us to live.

That is why Isaiah’s prophecy is still so powerful and moving. It has *passion*. It still speaks powerfully to *us*, today, because in its words, we can still hear and feel *that* people’s *longing* for peace, and we are *also* still motivated by his words to walk in God’s light.

The Apostle Paul was at times very prophetic in his writings. His letters most certainly contain words of judgment to Christians who, after converting to the new faith, held on to their “pagan” ways and lifestyles, as well as to Christian communities embroiled in *internal* power struggles and destructive debates.

And then, to Christians living at times in severe persecution, at times at the mercy of pagan rulers and in the midst of complete moral debauchery, Paul wrote passionately about the immanent dawn of the new era.

I love his image from the lectionary reading for this Sunday in Romans 13. He likens the present age to that time at, oh, this time of year, say, 5:00 in the morning, when the nighttime is *just barely* beginning to give way to the morning. There are two primary groups of people who witness that time of pristine newness. The first is those who have been living in the darkness. They are *exhausted*. They are weary. They may very well have spent their waking hours in what the Scriptures describe as “licentious living.”

The *other* group is those who have just awakened – having retired early, and slept well – and who are now ready to *live* in the light that is about to dawn.

“The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.”

Put away the darkness, and walk in the light. That is what the prophetic word beckons us to do. And that is what we *must* do, if we hope to approach Bethlehem, and the stable, and the manger, with any sense of “enlightenment.” The prophetic word bids us to come to Bethlehem refreshed, and ready – with eyes wide open, with a *vision* for our future, and a desire to consider what in the world the birth of that child has to do with those dreams becoming reality.

That is the “prophetic challenge” of Advent. Prepare the way! Prepare your *hearts* to encounter the story of our Savior’s birth, and consider its meaning. First, be honest and humble before Almighty God – aware of your shortcomings, and the sins of the world, and *your* part in those sins. Then hear the words of hope. Arise, and walk in the light. Consider your own *vision* for yourself, for this church, and for the world. Then (and only then!) will you be prepared to be changed by the news that awaits you in a stable at the end of your journey.

To God be the glory.