

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)

DECEMBER 1, 2002

Isaiah 63: 16b-17, 19b; 64: 2b-7; Psalm 80; 1Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 33-37

Dear Preachers:

Once again Advent finds us and our world unsettled. It did last year too, so soon after September 11th. Still there are war and rumors of war; military attacks and terrorist responses; feelings of vulnerability despite our high-tech military prowess; growing poverty and homelessness on our city streets. And yes, still: drugs and violence in school and home; subjugation of women and children in whole nations; once hopeful peace accords shattered; people's lifetime savings lost through corporate fraud; AIDS rampant in Africa and on the increase again in our own land...the list goes on.

We turn to God with anxious eyes this Advent. It is not that we want to opt out from the struggle to make our world a better place; we want to “keep on keepin’ on” against darkness. But sometimes we feel so inconsequential. After all is said and done, what difference do we make in the world? It all seems so “David and Goliath” and it looks like the big guy is winning. Advent asks some very basic questions: do we still trust that God is in charge, is faithful to us and will finally draw us into a loving and lasting embrace? Our Advent liturgies and scriptural texts encourage our trust in God. They keep our hope alive, despite national headlines and closer-to- home reports of family ruptures. Advent isn't mired in the past, doesn't nostalgically relish a former time when things seemed better. Advent looks forward. What do we have to look forward to anyway? God—that's who!

How does Advent begin for us today? It starts with one of the key voices of the season, Isaiah. Isaiah and Advent fit together, hand in glove. He opens the door to the season and he sets the tone for us. He is also interlocked with the people whose lament he voices to God in today's first reading. He names their and our human inability to get it right on our own with God. We fumble and stumble in the dark. He speaks our needs and voices our dissatisfaction with ourselves. And he does it in a typical prophet's extreme way--- he blames God for letting us drift on our own. “Why do you let us wander, O Lord from your ways and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?” Isaiah's contemporaries believed that God was the cause of everything that happens to people, good or bad. So in this way of reasoning, if God withdraws a protective hand, they fall into the grip of sin. Isaiah, speaking

for his people, is trying to stir God into returning to them, “Rend the heavens and come down.”

They want God to rip away anything that separates them from God, particularly their wanderings and the sins that kept putting God off. Certainly, Isaiah implies the God who “wrought awesome deeds...such as they had from of old,” could break through the barriers that their sin and disloyalty created. What they cannot do for themselves, they want God to do; to reestablish the close ties they once had with God, the potter, who shaped them by hand. How do we know this prophet is speaking for us moderns? Well, look at our condition: could we possibly live so alien from each other, so aggressively protecting our own lifestyle regardless of the exploitation of the poor and the risks to our planet’s resources, if we had not “hardened hearts no longer fearing” the God of the planet and all people? “Our redeemer” is the name Isaiah gives God, for our God continues to call us from being no-people to being God’s people.

The times and cultures may have changed since Isaiah wrote. He was a prophet to a devastated people just back from exile. He voices the lament of a people who have found the ruins of their former greatness. He acknowledges that God has a right to be angry, “we are sinful.” But there is great confidence implied in his forthright prayers, for behind his words is the trust that God will do just what Isaiah is pleading for, “rend the heavens and come down.” We are a long way removed from the historical situation Isaiah addressed, nevertheless, we too need God to “rend the heavens and come down,” to pierce the defensive armor that holds God off from our deeper selves. We need God to rend, rip away, the indifference and egoism that separates country from country, race from race, male from female, rich from poor, young from old, religion from religion, healthy from sick, etc. We pray that God will rend our hearts and get through to us this Advent, so that the crustiness that has atrophied them will be removed and they will become hearts capable of great compassion and love.

What shall we do this Advent? Despite the gaps we in the church and world have created between us and God, we express our faith this Advent that God has not given up on us. We reach out for God and discover God has been embracing us with love all along. There is a three-letter word in today’s reading that is a very big word. Isaiah makes abundantly clear that God has ample evidence to give up on us. Then he speaks the word—YET. (“Yet O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.”)

“Yet” is the word we carry with us this Advent. When our own limitations, narrowness and sin convince us that God has more than enough evidence against us—individuals, churches and nations—we will say the one-word-prayer that expresses hope, “Yet.” It is a reminder to God and us that we are the people God has invested much in. For God has taken flesh among us; Jesus is our sign that God will not give up on us. He is “God’s Yet”—the restoring pause in the cycle of our downward spiral that allows God’s mercy to step in.

If we want to be guided by the form of the Isaiah reading for our preaching then we might compose our own lament—use it for the preaching. Voice the community’s separation from God or voice our membership in a nation that has wandered far from God. After you develop the evidence against us, the signs of our sin, then interrupt with a “Yet.” Here express that God will do something to bring about our healing and forgiveness. Express the hope Isaiah does, that though we deserve what our wandering from God’s ways has earned us, nevertheless, God will never forget the covenant God has made with us. We experience this constant and faithful outreach of God towards us in this Eucharist. It reminds us that God is eternally bound to us because God took flesh, walked with us and went to death loving and forgiving our wanderings and false ways. We also pray at this Eucharist that God will rip away the veil covering our eyes that prevents us from seeing God in the least likely people.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *PREACHING MARK*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) ISBN 0-8006-3428-4 Paper, 217 pages.

Most Sundays during this new liturgical year we will be hearing Mark’s gospel. This book might be a fruitful study for the preacher as we focus on Mark. The author claims to have written specifically to “aid preachers and teachers in the church.” For this purpose it is very good. Thurston begins with a brief overview and then provides a commentary on the small units (pericopae) of the gospel. Thus, the preacher can study the passages as they appear in the lectionary. The notes focus on Mark’s patterns of organization and address their relevance to daily life.

QUOTABLE

Let in the cold,
Let in the wet,
Let in the loneliness,
Let in the quick,
Let in the dead,
Let in the unpeopled skies...

Fearful is my virgin heart
And frail my virgin form,
And must I then take pity on the raging of the storm
That rose up from the great abyss
Before the earth was made,
That pours the stars in cataracts
And shakes this violent world?

Let in the fire,
Let in the power,
Let in the invading might...

Let in the wound,
Let in the pain,
Let in your child tonight.

Kathleen Raine, "Northumbrian Sequence," COLLECTED POEMS, 1935-1980
(London: Allen and Unwin, 1981, 36-37)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Elias Syriani #0398002

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage address: <https://PreacherExchange.com> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes these reflections and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

“Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by four friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Carmen Mele, Brian Pierce, Angel Del Rio, Angel Mendez, and Dolorita Martinez, of the Grand Rapids Dominicans. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: jboll@opsouth.org "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh.

Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
Jude Siciliano, O.P
Email: FrJude@JudeOP.org.