

"The Love of a Both/And God"

In his delightful book Christmas in Harmony, Quaker pastor Philip Gulley writes of the events of the fictional town of Harmony, Indiana where Pastor Sam ministers to his flock. It seems that Sam's wife has had it with being in charge of the Christmas cards because he insists on sending a card to every person in the church directory, so Sam has taken over.

As he writes messages and addresses the envelopes, she has agreed to stuff the cards and seal them and in doing so, begins to read some of the things Sam has written. She comes to an unfamiliar name and questions who Otto Zumwalt is. Sam replies: "He fixed the freezer at the church." "Why is the freezer repairman in the church directory?" "The Friendly Women's Circle nominated him for honorary membership. They had a freezer full of noodles and it conked out. Otto had it up and running in two hours. Didn't lost a single noodle."

As his wife reads the inside of the card, she has another question: "We love you? Why'd you write that? Don't you think that's being overly familiar? He just fixed the freezer after all. It wasn't even our freezer." Sam responds, "I thought he might like to hear it."

And wouldn't we all? Isn't that we come to church anyway? To hear that we are loved? So you can imagine the dilemma I was faced with in my determination to stick to my plan of preaching all of the Advent sermons from the prophet Isaiah on this fourth Sunday of Advent. Because the birth of the Savior doesn't come until tonight. This morning we are technically still waiting! And Isaiah's words don't exactly seem like a love letter!

Most of us are familiar with this passage, whether it is from reading it in Scripture or from listening to it sung in Handel's *Messiah*. But if you are like me, you probably never

stopped to think about what it really means. Isaiah's words in this portion of his prophecy are written to warn the Israelites of God's impending judgement, brought about by their inability to live according to God's covenant. Assyria has already advanced on the Northern kingdom of Judah and God is warning those who live in Israel that their destruction will be next.

Yet to give them a sense of hope in the midst of this calamity, Isaiah tells them not to give up. God will still send a King who will lift the burden from the people's shoulders and put it on his own. A wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, prince of peace! This leader will put an end to all the strife that they are dealing with in their time.

And while *we* all want to hear about peace too, what I discovered as I studied the passage is that the Jews, who consider this *their* Scripture, believe this passage is written about King Hezekiah. And indeed, this is understandable. Hezekiah did come to power and abolished idol worship by destroying images of other gods in the land. He centralized worship, calling faithful Jews to worship only in Solomon's Temple. You see, they had started worshiping in the High Places of the pagan gods of the other peoples. He reformed the priesthood and brought back the celebration of the Passover. Indeed, Hezekiah is the author of some of the Psalms and is listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. And the writer of 2 Kings says of him, "there is no one like him among all the kings of Judah". He is even considered more righteous than King David.

But I can see you all thinking, "who wants to hear about King Hezekiah on Christmas Eve? Of struggles between political parties and wars between nations and people who threaten to undo us? We want to hear about the baby Jesus, meek and mild. About shepherds and angels. We don't need history and politics! We, like the freezer repairman, want to hear about love today!"

Well, as I prepared this sermon the Holy Spirit brought this thought to my mind. There is no need to depoliticize this passage, just because we are in the season of Advent. Hezekiah was indeed the king who would brighten the political future, for a time, for the ancient Jews. God was present by the power of the Holy Spirit when he led the 8th Century Jews to align their lives with God's covenant through THIS Wonderful Counselor. And this is a sign that God sends the kind of leaders that His people need at just the right time.

But friends, Jesus was born into events that were just as political. Even as we read the familiar words of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Luke we are reminded that Jesus was born IN Nazareth because of the political events of HIS time. The Roman census, ordered by Emperor.

We are also reminded that Jesus' life, death and resurrection were as political as they were Spiritual. What Jesus Christ did and said had far-reaching implications for life in his day as WELL as for our ETERNAL life. And when we try to take Jesus out of the secular world and place him only in the manger in Bethlehem, well that is not love at all. We are not loved by a God who is only in church – we are also loved by a God who is in the world. We do not worship a God who is either here or there. By a God who either sent Hezekiah to be the wonderful counselor OR the God who sent Jesus to be the Prince of Peace. We are loved by a BOTH/AND God. Isaiah's words are a prophecy of ALL of God's words.

You see, I believe we are called to consider Isaiah's words on this fourth Sunday of Advent to be reminded that our God is present in all times, places and circumstances. In the Holy and the corrupt. And when we try to restrict our Savior to the places that we consider sacred, then we miss seeing the God who is present in the rest of the world.

In his book Finding God in Unexpected Places, Philip Yancey talks about a South African woman named Joanna, who began a prison ministry that radically transformed one of her

country's most violent prisons. When Yancey asked her how she did it, she said, "Well, of course, Philip, God was already present in the prison. I just had to make him visible."

This story illustrates that we are loved by a BOTH/AND God who is not restricted to certain situations or events. God is not the God of EITHER the Old Testament King OR the New Testament Savior. He is Lord of BOTH.

This Advent reading reminds us that Christmas Eve, silent and holy as it may be as we come to the child in the manger, is just like any other night. It is a night when people are homeless and hungry, where families have arguments and are separated from one another because of them. War and addiction and abuse and prejudice do not vanish just because we want to figuratively make our way to Bethlehem.

So thanks be to God that we have come today to celebrate the birth of a BOTH/AND God. A God who was born a human and lived among us so that we would not have to separate God from the real life of work and school and play and politics. Yet, a God who makes all of the world the place for Divine activity.

I think perhaps our preference for Luke's manger and the calm of the barn animals and the star is because it is easy to think that Isaiah's words almost seem to be mocked by current events. That these words cannot possibly be relevant to us because our world is so different. But that is because we read the first verse and don't really pay attention to what it says. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined."

We read and think that Isaiah promised a world with no darkness. And then we stop there and look around OUR world and wonder where that light is today. With so much darkness still pervading our world, was the promise not meant for us? But the truth is that Isaiah does not

say that the light *abolishes* the darkness - rather that it shines on it. We are not just loved by a God either of light or of darkness. We are love by the God of BOTH LIGHT AND DARKNESS. And truthfully, without darkness, we do not need the light of Jesus Christ.

This is a word of hope because our world, like Isaiah's, is full of darkness and sin. Our leaders sometimes make decisions that don't make sense to us as Christians. They don't trust God. Yet, Isaiah reminds us that we must not allow despair to overwhelm us. We are to live in the light of God's presence. His light allows us to do our part in sharing the love that the world is hungering for. The light of Christ shines on the pathways that allow us to share the Good News that the deliverer, the ultimate agent of goodness and love, is at work in the world. So the best way to celebrate light is to choose to walk in it.

And when we walk in the light and remember Isaiah's words, we know that God promised to send the Amazing Counselor, Strong God, Eternal Father, Prince of Wholeness. (1) And that God kept that promise. He sent a real, human child into a real, human world to experience all of the agonies and ambiguities of life so that we would know that we are loved by a BOTH/AND God.

Friends we are not just loved by the God who is the child in the manger but by the one that Isaiah speaks of who was present when the troops of his day found their shirts soaked with blood. The light is not either in the holy or in the world – it is everywhere.

On this Christmas Eve morning, when candles burn bright to witness to us that God's light shines in all of our darkness, we are reminded that this is not just a claim for today, or because of Jesus. Rather the light points to the nature of who God is and always has been. When the candles are extinguished, the lights put away, and the decorations stored until next year, this

promise is indeed what we will need. And the God of BOTH the holy AND the unjust will still be with us. The light will still shine in the darkness.

When Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy, his governess came in to tuck him into bed and found him standing at his window, watching someone light the streetlights. When she asked him what he was doing he replied, "I'm watching a man punch holes in the darkness." Tonight we will celebrate God's light coming into the world again. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are called to punch holes in a world that is still filled with much darkness, as we share the light of love from our BOTH/AND God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.