

24 January 2010
Epiphany 3

Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Someone asked me this week about Pat Robertson's comment about Haiti having suffered these horrifying earthquakes because of a "Pact with the Devil". Apparently this goes back to stories (unsubstantiated) that when Haitian slaves revolted against the European colonial powers in 1791, eventually winning their independence in 1804, that they had only been successful because they had promised Satan dominion over Haiti for 200 years if they could win.

The idea that black slaves could not possibly have freed themselves from white rule without help from the devil is an astonishingly blatant piece of racism in an era of far greater subtlety. And it is odd to celebrate the victory of American tradesmen and farmers against the might British Army as a landmark of freedom and the victory of Haitian slaves against the French Army as the work of Satan.

Now, I want you to understand two things before I go on: 1) when I read the book of Revelation I do not read it as a timeline or guidebook for the end of the world. I believe that the Elder John wrote to an embattled Christian community to remind them that God had initiated the "end times" in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, John's recurring message in Revelation is that no matter how bad things look, God has already won the battle for the world. 2) I am not in the habit of criticizing other people's religious beliefs. Certainly not in public.

That all being said, if I were casting about to assign personalities to a literal reading of Revelation, I would be sorely tempted to name Pat Robertson as the Prophet of the Anti-Christ. I cannot think of a statement that is further from the love of God revealed in Christ than that God has sent this devastation on Haiti, has permitted the deaths of 10s of thousands of people, young and old, many of whom were devout Christians, because of a 200+ year old promise. Is that the God who came in a human body and life and who died for our sin so that we need not?

I am appalled to think that there are people who think that this is what Christians believe and I am ashamed that I and other religious leaders have not been more vocal and public in denouncing such a perversion of the Gospel.

So. Jesus goes to his hometown and attends synagogue on the Sabbath, which Luke tells us was his practice. Any competent member might be invited to stand and read scripture, then to sit and preach on it. (Imagine if we were to do worship that way? If I were to call you up to read the gospel and tell you *you* were to preach on it?). Now, remember, you can't just flip to the right page, even if you know your scripture well. These are the days before books. And there are no chapters, no verse numbers. So you have to scan through the writing as you unroll the scroll. You can image Jesus doing this,

and the rest of the congregation, solemn, quiet, waiting with anticipation for what he might say.

Jesus reads a passage from the time of the Exile, a promise of liberation and restoration generally associated with the Messianic age. Then he sits down and they wait. What will he say? Will he rail against the Romans? Will he call for an uprising? Will he promise to restore the purity of Israel, to get rid of all the foreigners?

But he simply says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

It’s easy for us to say, “Oh, Jesus fulfilled that scripture by being the Son of God.” But there’s more to it than that. By telling his neighbors in Nazareth that they themselves were living in the Messianic Age, Jesus, Joe’s boy, the carpenter’s son, challenges their expectations of a Messiah and of themselves. He’s offering them an opportunity to apply the scriptures to themselves, and he invites us to apply it to ourselves as well.

For we *do* live in the Messianic Age. That is what John is telling us in Revelation and what Paul kept trying to tell the churches that dotted the Roman empire. So what does it mean in Lowell Massachusetts in 2010 to bring good news to the poor? To proclaim release to captives? To announce recovery of sight to the blind? Who are those people? Who are the oppressed/broken hearted ones, the ones who suffer? What does the year of the Lord’s favor mean?

Certainly we can look at these things on the surface. We know that there are tent cities in Lowell; that there are people who through no fault of their own are losing their homes or having difficulty feeding their families and keeping warm. We all know someone who lives with a broken heart because of broken relationships, with parents, children, siblings, partners.

We all know people who have no anchor to ground them in life, to help them find a solid ground of meaning and purpose so that they have a sense that their life matters. Sometimes this lack of an anchor is philosophical, sometimes it’s because a job or a relationship which was the center point of their life is gone.

We know that governments around the world have political prisoners in jail because they were perceived as a threat “to the way we live”, because they are defined as our enemy. It is not necessarily because they have broken the law. They are held without trial, without the processes we have declared to be basic human rights in society.

We know people who are captive, prisoners of addictions – some of these are apparently harmless (though they are certainly less than healthy), and some are deadly. We know people caught in anxiety, depression, mental illness, despair. We know people who are so entrapped and enmeshed in fear that they will tell you certain people are not worth helping because they have brought their problems on themselves.

And then we have Paul's marvelous image of what it means to live in the fulfillment of the Messianic Promise – to live as if the Messiah has, indeed, come. "Christians," says Paul, "are the Body of Christ." The Church is the way Christ's fulfillment of God's will happens on earth.

You don't belong to the church like you belong to Rotary – Rotary will demand more of you! (I often wish we could charge people for not being here. We'd have no problem making our budget!). You don't belong to the church like you belong to a club. You belong to the Church the way your fingers belong to your hand or your big toe belongs to your foot or your digestive system belongs to your body. Some parts are beautiful, and desirable. Some parts may be gross, or even shameful. And ALL are necessary for the body to work. Manny and I will sometimes watch the program "Mystery Diagnosis" where people have a problem that doctors are unable to figure out what is wrong with them. Manny's answer is always, "I know. He has a blocked artery." But it is amazing what an impact an overabundance of a certain hormone or an undersupply of a particular enzyme can have on the human body. The smallest damage can have a major effect on someone's well-being, as anyone who has ever had a stubbed toe or a tooth ache will tell you. And cut off from the body, you are as useful as a severed finger.

The wider Church is called to be radically inclusive, in a way that transcends categories like Catholic/Protestant, Fundamentalist/Universalist, liberal/conservative, and congregations must look at themselves to ask "What walls have we built? What barriers are we maintaining to turn people away, to keep the gospel of grace to ourselves?" NOT that we do this intentionally. It is part of human nature to gather with people who are like us, which is why we must practice letting the Holy Spirit take us places we are afraid to go.

There is a truth in the famous statement of Walt Kelly's character Pogo: "We have met the enemy and they is us." The truth of the Gospel is that there is not "Them", there is only "us." Politicians who do not understand this are not qualified to decide whose children and elderly parents get health care and who pays for it.

There is no "Them: there is only "us." Religious leaders do not understand this will always be proclaiming something less than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is no "Them", there is only "us." And congregations that do not live this, proclaim this, will never be healthy, will never prosper for the sake of Christ's Rule.

Today God's promise is fulfilled in your presence. What part of this vision is God calling you to live out? What do you need to let go of to do so? What do you need to pick up to do so? What do you need from us that you may be about living God's promise fully, joyfully, abundantly?

The spirit of the Lord is on me,
for he has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord. Amen!