

WADE IN THE WATER

Texts on December 3, 2011

Advent 2

Isaiah 40: 1-11, Matthew 3: 1-10

When John comes down to the Jordan river saying God is on the move, the kingdom of heaven is near—hundreds of years have passed since any prophet offered a word worth keeping about God’s power to save. So far as the Hebrew Bible tells it, after the Jews headed home from exile in Babylon, God pretty much retired from the mighty works business, a.k.a. politics.

Maybe Isaiah of Babylon just went too far. In that gorgeous passage— Comfort, comfort ye, my people—so perfectly rendered by the aria from Handel’s *Messiah*— ♪ *Ev’ry valley shall be exalted*—there hides a terrible irony. When the poet writes from exile in Babylon, everyone knows that the Persian emperor Cyrus is turning his great army west toward Babylon. The die is cast. Babylon will fall. The Jews will be sent home from their sorrows to Jerusalem. Everyone knows it, but the poet in Babylon sees in it the hand of God and this inspires his song. “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God . . . may every mountain and hill be made low”—for General Cyrus! May this military march move, swift and unhindered, to victory utter and complete. That is Isaiah’s prayer. “See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.” Shock and awe in Babylon of Iraq. That is Isaiah’s song.

Doesn’t it make you puzzle over people who say they don’t want politics messing in their religion. Better: they don’t want the Bible messing up their religion. Still, a terrible irony awaited those who heard Isaiah’s call to hope, for in one way, it didn’t turn out. Yes, the Jews got to Jerusalem, but peaceful and pleasant Persia was not. Soon, Israel hated this empire too. A couple of centuries of that evil were followed by a couple more under Alexander’s great Greek armies; not long after, the Romans. Under the wheels of empires for half a millennium, this tiny tribe yearning for liberty turned inward to the living God. They remembered God’s mighty arm of old, but as for God, arm in arm with generals, channeling chariots to the battlefield— they mostly gave it up. The song of Isaiah settled into the people as a strange hope for a distant day when God would govern again somehow.

Now comes John, and proclaims government of God again. *John went down to the river to pray / Studying about that good ol’ way / Asking who shall wear the starry crown? / Good Lord, show me the way!* It’s kingdom come, he says. Time to wake up. Time to see ourselves for what we’ve been and what we’ve done. Time to repent. Time to wade in the water.

We read this story in Advent each year. But we misread it if we want the story to be just about John, about things that happened once. To read John the baptizer right, we need to get into our *own* waters, chilly and cold, and wake up and see ourselves for what we’ve been and what we’ve done. If we make Advent “that most wonderful time of the year,” as the seasonal song has it, then our religious rituals are just comforts, comforts for ye people to lull you into accepting that reign of terror and war which is the world as it is. Are we really waiting for Jesus to come and rule this very next December 25th? Of course not! “The grass withers and the flower fades—” but if we would live as people in whom the word of our God will stand forever, then

these rituals must give us courage to wade into waters of awareness, chilly and cold, and wake up.

Wake to what? [*The “people’s mic” was used for this paragraph.*] Here at The Riverside Church, as the new church year begins, we are going to wake to race and culture, to class and power and privilege, how these touch our hopes and fears and keep us from becoming a beloved community. John shouts “Repent.” We don’t love that word, but on John’s tongue, the word was simple. He shouted, “Shubh!” “Turn!” The government of God is coming. Turn from sleep in the old dispensation. Be converted, be subverted, become the beloved community.

Some years back, I took part in a workshop for churches committed to multi-cultural community. The leader opened with this: “The road toward the multi-cultural church goes through anti-racism awareness.” Period. That’s our Jordan, you could say. The leader was senior pastor of Minneapolis’ Church of All Nations, a vibrant and joyful church filled every Sunday with worship in the sounds of many nations.

There, the road to multi-cultural community took this turn. No longer do the hundreds read a written prayer of confession, but now just one voice goes down to the river to pray, saying what she knows to be her part, or he his, in the racism that wounds us all. The workshop leader asked which of us were senior pastors. We raised hands. “If then you are chief shepherd,” he asked, “are you not then also chief sinner? And if chief sinner, then are you not chief racist?” He described how, when the leader shows that he too, she too, fails and breaks, space is made safe for sinners to enter and speak.

I take part in the racism of my people. I cannot stop, not alone. When I first spoke of these things out loud before a congregation, I confessed that I had never yet been a guest to dinner at the home of an African American. I had shared an apartment with a couple from Ghana, been boyfriend with an African American girl, invited a former employee out of prison to live with me for a year; still, never just a guest for dinner at home. That congregation quickly, kindly removed that shard of my racism from me. But there is more.

Young John whom I shared a jail cell with back in October told me he never walks anywhere with three friends at night, for fear the cops will stop and frisk them. I have never thought about my companions at night in any way at all ever. I think about John now a lot, but nothing makes my privileges pass away. This is part of my racism. I like where I live in Harlem, but it was my choice. I could live anywhere. Never has my race touched my place of residence at all ever. This is my racism. Often now I wonder what unraveling harm heedless white money like mine brings to Harlem, a network complex with care amidst sorrows. I wonder, but monthly, I just pay my rent. This is my racism, too. I eat well, dress as I like, take the keys of my car as needed from an attendant’s hand. I see that all who help me are not white like me. This is my racism too. I cannot pull out. Where begin to break this world wide web of sin?

I hope you feel why it is that I cannot have spoken these things from up there behind the balustrade of the high pulpit. Many of us here deeply cherish the order of the architecture; the power, the placement of pastors and people and choir, as if all is set in stone. As beautiful as it is, as deeply as some yearn for Riverside to be *the*

church for the nation—a cathedral church, as we put it—the road to multi-cultural community must pass through awareness of all the sources of privilege that lock injustice in place. That is the Jordan we stand before. The path is through vulnerability. The Jordan waters mean a real death struggle with old values that keep God in his heaven and the world as it is. Unless we bring maximum attention to our old stories and even to the multiple meanings of this architecture and this form of worship, history will make of us a mere museum to power, to the way we were, and to the racism which was and is at the foundation of this nation.

So I invite you to consider the word “racist” with dispassion. No one will force it on you. But I ask: how might our resistance to that awful word be keeping us from the waters of repentance? Now, I am not a bigot and you are not a bigot. But we are all swimming in the soup of “race-qualified confusion.” A conversion is wanting, waiting. Cornel West writes: “Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a *turning* of one’s soul. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion.” (*Race Matters*, p. 19) So I invite you in love to consider the word “racist” with dispassion. If you trusted that God’s love were guiding you through the waters of awareness of our racism, could you go deeper?

Since Derrick Bell’s death, I have been steeping myself in his sober stories that explore how the “racial bonding of whites means that black rights and interests are always vulnerable to diminishment if not . . . destruction.” For more than a year, I have been meditating on Korie Edwards’ findings in her book, *The Elusive Dream*. After hundreds of precise observations and interviews, Edwards concludes that where blacks and whites desire to be together in interracial churches, even where blacks comprise the majority, still, in virtually every congregation, white culture and white power prevail. Many African Americans, she reports, abandon felt needs for more effusive, individual participation in worship in order to hold the interracial church together. She writes:

How does this happen? How do purposeful racially diverse churches succumb to whiteness and end up contributing to the reproduction of white hegemony? How is it that they continue to attract and keep people from diverse backgrounds under these conditions? . . . [Part of the answer from the churches studied is that] whites perceived white churches as viable alternatives . . . Despite their stated desire to worship in a racially diverse religious community, for most whites, their sense of connectedness to the church was fragile and dependent upon the church’s affirmation of whiteness. Their greater likelihood to leave . . . gave whites leverage. They may or may not have been consciously aware they had it, but they still accessed it. (p. 118 and p. 128)

Can we talk like this? Is it any less than historical tragedy that a black person aiming to raise questions like these cannot get a hearing except in particular gatherings—and that our own President literally cannot reveal a broken heart for the ravages of racism in the land he is asked to lead, because we are a nation obsessed with race and racism and ignorant of our sin. As the ethnic demographics of this nation hurtle non-Hispanic whites toward minority status in a generation or two, is it really a surprise that the national legislature stalls in inaction as white men throttle all engines backwards?

Racism is our Jordan. Can we wade in this water? We will wade in the water. Next Saturday morning, come as early as 8:00 a.m. for food and fellowship. At 8:30, with the loving guidance of our friends Rev. Jacqui Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church

with her husband Rev. John Janka, we will step into the waters with sacred conversations about race and church, about our sorrows, our needs, our hopes. There can hardly be a more important date on your calendar.

I leave you with this. In my confession of my part in racism, I had thought I would tell you to go read a poem which makes me weep, but which I believed I must not read aloud because, as a white American, I have absolutely no cause to make the lamentation, saying "me," in the voice of Langston Hughes:

O, yes, I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

But then I went back to read the whole poem, *Let America Be America Again*. There I received from the poet this blessing of inclusion, which will not pass away:

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| "Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? And who are you that draws your veil across the stars? I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart, I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars. I am the red man driven from the land, I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek— And finding only the same old stupid plan Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak. I am the young man, full of strength and hope, Tangled in that ancient endless chain Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land! Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need! Of work the men! Of take the pay! Of owning everything for one's own greed! I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil. I am the worker sold to the machine. I am the Negro, servant to you all. I am the people, humble, hungry, mean— | Hungry yet today despite the dream. Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers! I am the man who never got ahead, The poorest worker bartered through the years. Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream In the Old World while still a serf of kings, Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true, That even yet its mighty daring sings In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned That's made America the land it has become. O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas In search of what I meant to be my home— For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore, And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea, And torn from Black Africa's strand I came To build a "homeland of the free." The free? Who said the free? Not me?" |
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Not me—nor ye, my people—not any of us, not yet. This too, is our racism, that we are bound until we are unbound together, and free. Come wade in this water.