

POWER IN A PROMISE

Texts on Sunday, December 4, 2016

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Matthew 3: 1-12

Someone once called my church, asking “Where in the Bible do the prophets predict Christ’s coming?” A short answer might have listed half a dozen familiar passages. My answer was much shorter: *Nowhere!* No prophet, major or minor, anywhere predicts the coming of Christ, or *the messiah* (in Hebrew)—usually translated as “anointed.” *Nowhere!*

So, 1 point for the right answer in the game.

But the real point is that the prophets weren’t playing that game. Prediction did not interest them. Now, we love it! Prediction seems a neat trick. The sayings of Nostradamus and Jeanne Dixon and astrologers turn lots of people on. The predictions of presidential pollsters and pundits fix all our attentions for most of two years out of every four. Why? Predicting the future feeds our fantasy that *somebody* knows what’s going on, because God knows, we don’t. Many really do wish that ♪♪ *Someone Sees You When You’re Sleeping, And Knows When You’re Awake, And Knows if You’ve Been Bad or Good* . . . That wish is so strong that even in the churches, some are persuaded that in the old days, Mr. God used to tell the prophets just what was coming and the name and address of just who was going to save us.

But none of that is in the Bible; it’s just wishful thinking. Think about this. If making *predictions* is what God’s Word is all about, then human freedom is fake. If God has already ordered things to turn out this way or that, why bother working out how anything goes? If Bible prophecy is predictions—even of things that took place long ago—then the life we lead we *don’t* lead; it is all play acting for a God watching and wincing while his plans play out—maybe with a laugh track to relieve his monotony.

The image of God all-controlling is an image of a great dictator. But that can’t be God—not if God is great. You know this in your bones: the gift of our life, our consciousness, our freedom is infinitely more serious and mysterious, more risky, more awesome, more wonderful than any wished-for peek at the plans could deliver. Life is open! Surely there is great praise in our saying that from God comes a power to see what is eternal and to hope for things that cannot be seen. But if God is *Emmanuel*—*God with us*—then, O Come, O come, Emmanuel, the future is wide open. It is not a map already laid out in heaven. The future is like a land for exploring, a kingdom still to be created in the power of witness to what’s eternal.

The prophets weren't making predictions. They were making promises. You can bet your life on the difference. A prediction claims to state what is going to happen, no matter whether anyone is listening. The weatherman predicts the rain; whether we listen or not, the rain is coming—or not. A prediction, false or not, stands alone; the listeners, or lack of, don't matter.

But when you make a promise, you risk your own life to take part in the cause of your concern. You put your word out there. Your word stands for the whole wonder of you. You become part of the possibility in a new thing. When two marry, they do not *predict* they will be married 20 years later; they put their word before God and these witnesses as a sign of the whole wonder and mystery of themselves, these two brief candles in time.

The prophets were making promises. Isaiah's vision of righteousness for the poor and the weak is best felt as a promise. Promising is what John was up to. It is part of what Jesus was up to, too. They became lenses through which God Holy Spirit focused the eye of the people on the kingdom possible, the kingdom of promise. Now, we also say that politicians make promises—but as we know, now more than ever, politicians' promises are mostly lies. No politician ever risked what a prophet risks, who sees the kingdom of God at hand—no prediction!—and now with a word, opens the way for those with ears to hear to trust in the presence of God.

What sort of word opens the way to the promise of the presence of God? Let us not suppose that the answer can be found at the back of the book, or like a law on the books, or in any verse of our Bible. The Bible certainly tells stories of people *hearing* a word of promise—but what that word is can't be written on paper. It only comes on live, inside a living soul. Still, something can be said about how a soul prepares to hear the promise of the prophet. Advent is for this: to prepare to receive the Word of promise.

The prophet's promise turns your mind from the past to the possible. It's not a formula, it's not a trick. But when you feel your mind really turning from the past to the possible, you are being grasped by the promise of God. This is why the prophet cries, *Repent!* *Repent* means to get serious about the way things are, in your life, in your city, in your nation. The prophet's promise always begins with a judgment on things as they are, because evil depends on us mindlessly repeating what we have done before. The theologian Kierkegaard wrote, "Sin is not sin. Sin is the continuation of sin." In other words, evil, if not denied and not continued, falls apart like bread in the water. Repentance is the spirit of right judgment about what has happened, a judgment which severs the grip of the past on the mind so you can press forward to the promise of the possible. You know this pattern:

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of “interposition” and “nullification,” one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

There it is: the prophet does not predict, but with his word he prepares for repentance, and with his life, he promises the possible. So let us use the promise of the prophet Isaiah to ask what “we” have been doing which we need to repent in order to open to the promise of the possible.

You can read what needs repenting straight from the promise of what shall be. The promise opposes the past. The prophet promises that there shall come a leader full of the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. What do we repent? That we have not often chosen leaders like that, but men of small and fearful mind.

The prophet promises that in reverence for God, leaders will judge not by the senses, but by righteousness. What do we repent? Laws and customs that judge by the color of the skin, by male and female, by gay and straight, rich and poor, and a great many more fears and prejudices wired deep in the wary, worried animal brain deep down in every human.

The prophet promises justice for the poor and equity for the wretched of the earth. What do we repent, in this land of unregulated adulation of wealth and of wealthy men? We repent leaving the invisible man, the invisible woman on the streets and in the back country—unemployed, poorly educated, addicted, lousy-housed, sick, disabled, and ignored.

The prophet promises that the wolf shall live with the lamb. What do we repent? Three generations of war and more war—permanent war—rained down on little lands lorded over by tiny tyrants who get in the way of our wealth. For generations, we have been denying what is going on, and the future never comes, because no one can be great—America can never be great again—without repentance. Thus promises the prophet.

But, says the prophet, I promise that “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him.” In that day, “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” It is not a prediction. The future is unwritten, it might not come. Or, it might come, like a green shoot up fast—but come and go! and no one notice, and none repent—this happens every day—and no divine future come, but we go on repeating ourselves, reproducing greed and injustice over the least and the lost.

The promise of the prophet is not what will happen, but what *can* happen, when enough of us are ready to see it. This is true in your personal life as well as the national. Therefore, says the prophet, “I promise to walk

with you and to wake up with you to the power of witnessing to the rule of justice and compassion, so that the earth may be full of the knowledge of the Lord, like the waters covering the sea.”

You see how much is at stake in how you read your Bible? Thinking that prophecy is prediction is bad for your bones. It takes all the weight off your moral muscles; they go soft supposing that God’s going to save your bones.

But God loves you, more than you know, and God’s is the Spirit waiting for *your* witness to see the future that is possible. Wake! Make a promise, make a big one like Isaiah’s, like John’s in the desert, that you will be baptized in Holy Spirit and in fire. Share in the Body. Drink the cup. Keep your word. Know the power Who waits for a whole world.

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