

“The Zeal of the Lord”

Luke 2:1-20 and Isaiah 9:2-7

Christmas Eve, 2023
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The Zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!

When I began thinking about this sermon, that’s the line that stood out to me from all the readings recommended for Christmas. The Zeal of the Lord! I must admit that zeal hasn’t been a part of my vocabulary or attitude much this Christmas. For the past four weeks, during our Sunday school, one of our retired pastor members has taught a class focused on Charles Dickens’, A Christmas Carol, and my heart goes out to poor old Scrooge. I feel like Christmas can be a humbug at times, even if not for the same reasons that he did. What cause do we have to celebrate with the state of the world? How can we make merry when so many are suffering? How can we rejoice when wars and rumors of wars persist year after year after year? When people so casually take up weapons of war as play toys and violence to solve even everyday problems?

I’m not the first person to note the brokenness of the world in which we live. You hear overtones of that in the passage Allison read from Isaiah. The people who now walk in the light are those who have experienced captivity and oppression. They’re celebrating that they’ve been liberated from the bar across their shoulders, from the rod of their oppressor. Their joy in the harvest morphs to the joy they experience when sharing the plunder of a military victory. Jesus was similarly born into a world “painted with dust and blood.” His own parents were poor immigrants forced, right at the time of his birth, to travel to a hometown in which they no longer lived, just to be counted. The people into which he was born were ruled by a series of puppet kings who colluded with a foreign power to allow for them to be taxed and oppressed. The people in both those ages were longing for release from all that held them captive, especially the violence to which they were subjected daily.

The words of the prophet Isaiah indicate that release came in *that* time. To them was born a child whose authority grew and who ushered in a reign of peace. He was called “Wonderful Counselor,

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Because of Handel’s Messiah we’ve grown accustomed to immediately associating that language with Jesus but before his birth, the text celebrates one who was born to that people, another who was born in the line of David. Perhaps you also noted one of the grittier verses in this text, one which I debated reading. The freedom of those people in Isaiah’s time is granted through a war, waged in justice, waged victoriously, but a war nonetheless. Their freedom comes because “all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood are burned as fuel for the fire.” If you use your sense to imagine that scene, it’s grizzly even if it’s done in the name of justice.

The kings of old, the kings of today, the earthly rulers of the world, today and yesterday, even King David and his successors ruled through force and bloodshed when necessary. Even when their cause was just, it was through violence that they triumphed. It’s important that we acknowledge that reality, because when we do, the birth of Jesus, into similarly violent circumstances, stands in sharp contrast.

In the fullness of time, God chose a different way. God chose to become one of us in the Christ child. “God chose a humble birthplace, a helpless child, impoverished parents, the lowly shepherds as the first visitors. The creator of all, the one who will reign forever as true, just, King of Kings, came into the world in humility, in the form of a human being, frail and vulnerable. The one who existed in an eternal relationship of joyful, self-giving, loving communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit chose freely to unite himself to creation, human beings in particular, taking upon himself all the weakness and limitation such existence requires.”ⁱ

God could have fully entered the human condition in any form, in a form before which we might have cowered and quaked, but at least understood, instead God chose to condescend to the limitations and indignities of the human condition. The Word became flesh, says the author of John’s gospel. He bound himself to us so that we might be bound to God forever.

But the child of the creche is also the child of the cross. He will grow into a man who will take on the suffering of the world in order to redeem it. His answer to the violence of the world is not to enact his own violent campaign but to willingly sacrifice himself. As much as we might wish to freeze Jesus in his cherubic infantile state, it’s the fullness of his life, death, and resurrection that reveals the good news of God’s love and justice. Jesus lived, died, and rose again to inaugurate a new kingdom and to empower us to live within it.

God’s way of entering the world, of addressing the brokenness and violence of the world, is to transform it from the inside out. It was not just a spiritualized entry into our lives, but a revelation meant to change our lived reality and especially the lived reality of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. Any rulers of this world who would lead us to demonize the poor, use violence against the weak, build walls of suspicion and steel to separate one people from another are a part of the old order that is passing away. The end of violence in the world, the end of violent tendencies in human beings, even in each of us has begun and will be completed in and by Christ who will be triumphant.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

To face Christmas without facing the reality of the world and of our own brokenness is to rob it of its true power and meaning. The incarnation of Christ is the demonstration of God's zeal and creative power used for us and not against us. That is something to celebrate. That is light for our darkness. May we walk in the light of Christ's redemptive, transforming love, seeking to be among those who turn from the ways of violence and hatred and to the ways of God's justice and peace. May we do so not just when it's convenient but even when it's not. May we do so in all realms of life, family, work, social, political until all the world resounds with the peace of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Clader, Linda Lee. "Homiletical Perspective on Isaiah 9:2-7." Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, edited by David L. Bartlett and Babara Brown Taylor, West Minster John Knox Press, 2008, 99-103.