

The Heartbeat of God

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Advent III

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This past summer ... when I attended the Washington Island Forum in Wisconsin ... the speaker was John Dominic Crossan ... who is a New Testament and Jesus scholar ... and has written many books ... many of them with his contemporary ... the late Marcus Borg.

Crossan spoke a lot about justice at that forum ... the biblical justice that he calls distributive justice ... and for him this justice ... the kind of justice that includes all people in a beloved community ... is the heartbeat of our Bible ... and thus we might presume ... it is also the heartbeat of our God.

Crossan said we don't always mean distributive justice when we talk about justice ... sometimes we talk about justice as punishment or as revenge ... but he said the Bible *always* means distributive justice when it talks about justice ... always means that kind of justice is the heartbeat.

And at the heart of this distributive justice ... is the Hebrew people's notion of who God is ... and so in their writings in the Hebrew Bible ... they imagine the human community as family ... as a well-run household ... according to Crossan ... where everyone in the family has a right to a fair share of what the household has.

In other words ... all the kids are well fed and they get their fair share. It's just taken for granted ... it is their right. And since this is also the way God works ... this is the way a flourishing human community should work as well.

And so this flourishing human community is shaped and sustained by God's passion ... and our passion ... for distributive justice.

At the core of this well-run household ... at the heart of distributive justice for the Hebrew people ... was the notion of a Jubilee Year ... that year described in the Book of Leviticus ... that came around every 50 years ... when the community would hit the social reset button ... so to speak.

The Jubilee Year leveled the playing field: slaves were freed ... debts were forgiven ... and land was restored to the rightful owner ... it was a year when all property lost in economic transactions would be restored and returned.

And all this was done in order to permit a stable, functioning community for everyone. It was an actual realignment of wealth and power.

Now scholars aren't sure this year was actually ever achieved ... but this was the plan ... this was God's desire ... according to the biblical prophets.

Well on this third Sunday of Advent ... our lectionary text ... once again from the Prophet Isaiah ... is talking about ... is presuming ... this very same thing.

And so the prophet begins by saying that the spirit of God is upon him ... that God has sent him to bring good news to the oppressed ... to bind up the brokenhearted ... to proclaim liberty to the captives ... release to the prisoners and to proclaim the year of God's favor ... that is to say ... proclaim this Jubilee Year.

Isaiah is pretty clear here ... that God's spirit is landing on him and on other human beings ... that God is anointing people like him ... and people like you and me ... to be about this work of distributive justice ... to be about this work that is the heartbeat of our God.

And those who accept the assignment ... the text says ... will become oaks of righteousness ... they will be called the planting of God ... and they will repair the devastations of many generations ... they will be sturdy ... durable ... resilient.

Now if these words from the Prophet Isaiah sound familiar ... it may be because we read them in the Gospel of Luke as well ... they are the same words Jesus chooses to read in the synagogue in Nazareth ... as he begins his own public ministry.

Jesus tells those who are present that day ... that these words of Isaiah ... about bringing the good news and binding up the brokenhearted ... are what he will be about ... that he will fulfill these words.

And if you will recall ... the radicalness of Jesus' statement evoked such hostility among his listeners ... that they sought to kill him ... they tried to throw him off a cliff.

So we need to be clear ... a vision of jubilee ... a vision of profound hope for the disadvantaged ... was a shocking thing in Jesus' day ... is a shocking thing to many in our own day ... because it's devastating news to those who value and benefit from the status quo ... those people who like things the way they are.

So ... if we know that justice is the heartbeat of God ... so that the human community can flourish ... and ... that human beings are called to aid God in this work ... how do we do that? How do we cooperate with this God whose heartbeat is justice? What does it require of us?

We talked last week about the need for repentance ... for that lifelong turning more and more towards God. And we know God is also ... always ... turning towards us ... and so surely it is in acts of justice ... both large and small ... that we meet God ... that we overlap with God ... that we most deeply connect.

And if that is true ... and I believe that it is ... then mission should define us ... we as church should exist for the sake of the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the imprisoned, the mournful ... for the sake of building that beloved community.

Now we know there are many things that destroy this community God desires ... first and foremost we could probably list poverty and all that goes with it ... like inadequate housing and inadequate food and inadequate medical care and inadequate education. Even the ancient Hebrew people understood that very well.

We could add to that prejudice and hatred and objectifying others ... they also destroy community. And so can the isolation caused by mental and physical illness ... or grief that remains unmourned ... we could name many things.

All of these can destroy community ... especially when there is an attitude of indifference in the community that goes along with them ... when these things aren't seen and aren't named ... but just exist.

If we aren't paying attention we will not see these issues that divide ... and so it goes back to Walter Brueggemann's idea that I mentioned last week ... that too many of us are concerned only with our "private shalom" ... instead of a public shalom ... instead of a thriving community.

And in today's social climate ... that is becoming easier and easier for us to do ... because the level of loneliness so many people experience ... the level of isolation ... is increasing ... making us less and less able to see the needs around us.

You may have read some of the recent media stories ... about the way such isolation changes us and makes us less healthy ... both physically and mentally ... less able to engage with others ... from the young addict who has been abandoned by friends and family ... to the elderly woman living alone with few visitors ... to the prisoners held in solitary confinement for years on end ... to those who are in front of a screen much of their day.

And perhaps we can also add to that list many of our decision makers as well ... so many of the politicians who are making decisions that affect all of us.

Too often they also live isolated lives ... and that can keep them from really seeing the pain caused by all these things that destroy community. It is very easy for them in today's world to keep themselves removed from the pain of many of their decisions ... because their children have insurance ... their parents are well-off so don't depend on Social Security ... their neighbors have enough to eat.

I suspect very few of them have their eyes wide open.

And then if we add to all that isolation ... the dangers from social media ... we really have a recipe for not seeing the truth of so many lives.

There was another recent interview with one of the early vice-presidents of Facebook ... about how he now has tremendous guilt ... because he believes Facebook has eroded the core foundations of how people behave with each other and between each other.

He says: "Facebook is literally at a point where I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works. That is truly where we are. There is no civil discourse, no cooperation ... there is misinformation, there is mistruth."

So those of us in church ... who are part of a beloved community ... might be the antidote for such isolation ... and for such mistruth ... if ... and it's a big if ... if we can continue to be defined by mission ... and if during this Advent season and all other seasons ... we can stay awake to the new thing God is doing in our midst ... if we can become those oaks of righteousness ... if we can allow justice to be our heartbeat as well.

Because someone has to be ready to build up the ruins ... to raise up the former devastation ... to rebuild the ruined cities ... to heal the wounds of many generations ... and the church may just be anointed for such a task.

Doing that won't require special skill or training or even a lot of money ... it will just require from us a lot of heart ... it will require that we continue to be sturdy ... durable ... resilient.

This Advent season is a time of waiting ... certainly we are waiting for God to come. But it is also a time when God is waiting ... waiting for us to turn towards the holy ... waiting for us to participate.

The kingdom of God is near ... is present ... when we collaborate with God's justice ... when we understand that the heartbeat of our God is justice ... when we stay awake with our eyes wide open.

We have to remember not just that Jesus came ... but also why he came ... to usher in that beloved community that would have no end. Amen.