

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 1, 2008

We turn here to the texts for Advent II, Year B, that is Sunday, December 7, 2008. As some calendars will show, this is also "Pearl Harbor Day." The Advent texts introduce that "stranger at the manger" John the Baptist for the first of his two Sundays of appearance. Next week we get the Fourth Gospel's take on John the Baptist.

Isaiah 40: 1 - 11

Crucial to interpretation of this well-known (thanks to Handel and "The Messiah") text from Second Isaiah is to get the sense of the dialogue that is going on in the text. Sometimes the location of the quotation marks helps, often it does not. I am unsure whether quotation marks would have appeared in the ancient texts or not. I doubt it. At any rate, there is a dialogue going on between one voice that urges getting up to a high mountain to proclaim the great thing God is doing, and another voice that registers despair. The preacher's challenge is to take both voices seriously. Who are the voices? God and the prophet? The prophet and his hearers? I don't think we know. But we do know, do we not, the dialogue between faith and fear, between hope and despair? The voice of faith says, "Cry out!" The voice of despair answers, "What shall I cry? All flesh is grass." That is, human constancy is about as constant as grass, here today, gone tomorrow. But . . . but . . . God's word endures forever. This is a good word to announce in our times. God's word, a.k.a. Jesus Christ, endures forever. So the passage closes with a picture of the coming shepherd who will gather the lost sheep, that's us, unto himself.

II Peter 3: 8 - 15a

God's time is not our time! And that's good news. What you and I thought was God not coming through and delivering on God's promises is in fact, God's patience, giving us time, a little more time, to turn around, to wake up, to prepare for his coming. What a great job of "re-framing" by Peter, who is presumably dealing with the pastoral problem of disappointment and its particular face in the early church, the delay of Christ's second coming. Not a delay, says Peter, but a change, an opportunity. Then, invoking an image we've heard before (Thessalonians, Mark) the day (the Day of the Lord) will come as a "thief in the night," that is when we least expect it. I was talking with a man recently who has had a heart attack. He said that two weeks before his heart attack he had said to his wife, "Heart problems? Not me. No history of that in my family. I'm in good shape." Two weeks later he had been laid low, his life turned upside down by something he never saw coming. Hard for us to surrender our illusion of control, but the thief in the night image is a challenge to that illusion and an invitation to re-orient our lives to God. The images of destruction in the later verses of this text, along with the idea that we believers are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness, has a particular purchase amid the economic crisis. Were, are we, settled down in the present order? If so, the economic crisis comes like that thief in the night. Do we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth? Perhaps then the economic crisis, not without pain and challenge, reminds us that a consumer capitalist economy is not our true homeland.

Mark 1: 1 - 8

And now, yes, "The Stranger at the Manger," what's-he-doing-here?, voice-in-the-wilderness, John the Baptist. Breathing fire, eating bugs, hanging out in the desert, a true Wild Man-- what's he doing on stage when we're trying to do baby things, sweet manger moments, soft music, candlelight and carols? Aren't these Advent texts just a challenge! When we are ready for Christmas to lull us to a peaceful slumber, along comes John saying, wake up, get ready, repent. Perhaps we need John more than ever this year if Christmas is not be an escape but a true time of hope and transformation. We have to ask "what's real?" "what's God up to?" "what does God ask of me and us?" John's answer, strip-down, get real, get ready. One of the great and amazing things about John is how well he creates a sense of expectation without knowing for sure or saying for sure who or what he expects. "After me comes one more powerful than I." That's it, pretty much. The only thing John knows for sure, it seems, is that he is not the guy. He is a forerunner, advance scout, opening act. And that is the one thing we can know of ourselves and of the church: we point to another. We point to Christ. It strikes me that too many preachers try to preach Advent themes: watchfulness, expectation, readiness, alertness without preaching Christ. If and when that is the case all that we're doing is exhorting human attitudes and values which have little chance against the crush of cultural Christmas. Our watchfulness and expectation is for Christ who is always hidden and yet ever manifest.