

## Weekly Reading – Monday, December 22, 2008

In view this week in this space are the lessons for the First Sunday after Christmas, December 28, 2008. I expect that some preachers will be taking a Sunday off and guest preachers will arrive as the Christmas uncles do in Dylan Thomas's wonderful Christmas reading, "A Child's Christmas in Wales." Choirs too will take a hiatus, but it's still the Lord's Day and someone, preacher, needs the word you have been appointed to bear.

Isaiah 61: 10 - 62: 3

Even if the great hubbub is mostly over, it is really only the 4th of the 12 days of Christmas. We Americans tend to want, for whatever reason, to wrap Christmas up pretty quickly. Decorations back in the box, take down the tree, dump it unceremoniously at the curb for pick up. Hold on there, says Isaiah, not so fast. Let rejoicing reign, let the earth be glad. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." It may be that if the church cannot sustain an authentic voice of praise something is crucial is missing! "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest." Tell out the Lord's greatness, God's faithfulness, to all the ends of the earth. The salvation that begins somewhere (Jerusalem) is to continue elsewhere and everywhere.

Galatians 4: 4 - 7

If Isaiah gives God's work a large, historical screen to write on, Paul brings it home to the heart and to the life of each person. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son . . . in order to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as children." The Spirit plays an integral role here, a sign and power of a status revolution and personal transformation. Once objects, under a guardian, without agency; now, by God's grace, subjects with a voice, a voice that cries out, "Father." I somewhere recently read a line from an adoptive parent to her child. "Though I never carried you in my womb, I have always held you in my heart." What does it take for us to make the move from being watchful and fearful, unsure that we are truly and wholly loved, to trusting that we are loved, that we belong, that we not only children but even heirs? Paul says that what it takes is grace, God's grace made manifest in Christ.

Luke 2: 22 - 40

The denouement of the birth story is remarkably different in Luke and Matthew. In Matthew the Holy Family runs for its life, fleeing Bethlehem/ Jerusalem for sanctuary in Egypt. But in Luke, they go to the Temple in Jerusalem for the appropriate rituals. The point, in both gospels, is not to relate historical data but theological truth. The truth here is that Jesus has been born to reclaim and recall Israel for its universal mission as God's people. To ratify this vocation, Mary, Joseph and their baby boy encounter two ancient exemplars of the faith, who are keeping faith alive, in the Temple precincts, Simeon and Anna. They are like bookends for the Nativity Story in Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth, John's parents, their counterparts at the outset. Luke wants us to know that Jesus is deeply Jewish, deeply Israel. Simeon not only thanks God that he can now depart in peace but offers a darker prophecy, that Mary's son is

"destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed." Just so, when Jesus begins his ministry, one chapter hence, in Luke 4, his inaugural sermon issues in an attempt to kill him. The point is that rejection of God's revelation is always a part of the story, even from the beginning. One might take the opportunity here to underscore the rich context of family and faith in which Jesus was nurtured. If a person is to have the courage to face resistance and rejection, such courage is a gift in no small part of strong and loving parents and a faithful community.