

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 29, 2008

This week preachers and worship planners have a choice. We can go with the lessons for the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 4, or with those for Epiphany, which is January 6, but will probably be observed by many congregations in their worship this Sunday. I think I have posted comments on the Epiphany texts in the past which should be accessible by clicking on "Archive," so here I'll comment on the texts for the Second Sunday of Christmas.

Jeremiah 31: 7 - 14

These warm and promising words come from the part of Jeremiah known as the "Book of Consolation." The reason for that designation is readily apparent as one reads or hears. These words promise return from exile, regathering of God's dispersed and disconsolate people. "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow." (31: 13) At its heart the message here is that those who experience exile, mourning, or loss are not beyond God's knowledge or beyond God's capacity to renew and restore. When we are in the midst of grief or loss, or some kind of exile, it feels as if there will never be an end. This passage, and many others, say at least this: an end will come. A depression will end. A period of dislocation will conclude. There will a new and a brighter day. Here, in Jeremiah, it is not however only about the individual. It is about a people, a community, a society. At least for some of us, the recent Presidential election was this kind of experience.

Ephesians 1: 3 - 14

This is the kind of extremely rich text that makes me question, ironically perhaps, the value of the Lectionary. By that I mean, this text may be best preached as part of series of sermons on Ephesians and not a single shot. But, setting that thought to the side, back to the lesson, which follows Paul's greeting and opens the letter. The transformation of which the Jeremiah text spoke comes to a new and unexpected focus in Christ. "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing." Paul then enumerates these blessings: redemption, forgiveness, wisdom and insight, truth and the gospel of salvation. A particular emphasis of Ephesians is the way that everything comes together in Christ, verse 10: "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Folks in the Ephesus area were subject to polytheism, which saw the world as the province of a host of competing deities, each with their own turf. To that Paul says, "No," all things are gathered, ordered, united in Christ. In Christ there is order, not chaos. Paul locates his readers between the first and second comings of Christ and presents the Holy Spirit (vs. 13) as a kind of down payment on the fullness of salvation. Here is an already-though-not-yet understanding of eschatology.

John 1: (1 - 9) 10 - 18

The effect of the lectionary selection from the Johannine Prologue is to omit or place in parentheses the opening words and a first reference to John the Baptist's ministry, and to highlight two other themes of the Prologue: that the revelation of God in Christ is not obvious to, or welcomed by, all; and that this revelation is, yet, received by some who are, as

a consequence, reborn. These two themes are clear in verses 11 - 13. In the final five verses we have a creed-like declaration or assertion of faith and faith's conviction. Back to the two themes of 11 - 13, and the twin themes of rejection and reception. Why do some reject and some receive what God is doing? Hard to say. We do know, however, and all of Scripture acknowledges this reality, that some "did not accept him," while others did. And often who receives and who rejects is a reversal of our expectations. "He came to his own and his own people did not accept him." Painful. The concluding verses, with the exception of 15, which again references John, are a bold declaration of faith as strong and resonant as any creed ever written: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth . . . From his fullness we have received grace upon grace." In our post-modern and pluralistic age, such bold declarations are sometimes hard to make and hard to hear. That this one places a punctuation point on the Christmas story should remind us that Christmas is more than sentiment and sweets.