

Advent 1 - Dec 3, 2017

### **Spinning Theme**

Not easy readings, are they? Today we begin the movement toward Christmas. This is hardly the stuff of a baby shower.

Advent is the season when the church holds up a paradox. That God, creator of the universe, spinner of worlds, the mystery that moves the sun and the stars....

God is here and now and pulsingly present.

And yet - this is not the best of all possible worlds, this is not the fulfilment of all things. God IS here, the world is alive, shimmering with the Holy, overflowing with glory

and yet. And yet.

God IS here, and yet to come. Even now like a woman in labour about to give birth to a new creation

I do love this about our faith. It makes me crazy, but it's freeing too. I don't have to fall into either trap: the first saying that this is the best of worlds; that everything is as it's supposed to be, if only I had the eyes to see it. NO. I am free to see the flaws, the pain, the brokenness and not be forced to twist that into some sort of God's will...

And I'm also freed from the trap of saying the world is evil, flawed beyond mending, and all we have to do now is wait to be released from the surly bonds of earth, the captivity of life in the body.

NO.

No to both. This world IS a magnificent creation from a good creator, filled to overflowing with life and love and glory

AND this world is broken and hurting and not the way its creator intended it to be. The way our faith expresses that is first to include in the very first book of the Bible two separate stories of creation, one emphasizing the goodness, one emphasizing the fallenness....and says....

there. There you go. There we are. Like a family album. Here's one picture of us, and here's another.

The other way the church does this is to say

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

or

Christ is dying, Christ is rising, Christ is coming again

Already and not yet.

Incidentally, it's so much easier for the Hebrew mind to grasp this...why? Because in the Hebrew language there are not tenses. The lines between past present and future are murky and blurred and you have to grasp from the context of what you're reading, which is meant.

Nevertheless, we speak, for the most part, English, or at least languages that separate time into a linear concept. so let's go with that.

God is already here - and yet to come.  
The readings can help us make good use of that.

They're hard readings, though. If you came today to hear away in a manger, I'm sorry.

BUT if you hang in with us, I believe you're going to hear something much better. And if not BETTER then more compelling, so that by the time we do get to Away in a Manger, the new life there will shine more brightly.

This language....Isaiah and Mark...

Sometimes people just turn from the scriptures saying - see??? It's all so confusing, violent, not relevant. Where's the love? Who wants to hear that?

BUT, this is not foreign, not really. And as for relevance, well...you know this language. This sentiment. You know it in your gut. In your knower. THIS - the heart of it, is closer than any of us probably wants to admit.

It's the voice of people worn out by violence, overwhelmed by tragedy, sick of the news, frightened and angry and tempted to give up on - everything. and Just wishing that the whole thing could blow up and we could start over.

Lloyd used to say....etc

That's not hard to understand. That's not far from us. At all.

Here's the deal.

Isaiah is writing after his own country had been violently conquered in war, spent time as prisoners and exiles, and then a very disappointing return to a demolished country. They would never again go back to the good old days. Everything seemed smaller, flawed, broken, disappointing and just too much trouble. No one could agree about anything. There were ethnic fights....

it was horrible. That's the context of the Isaiah reading.

As for Mark, he too is writing in the aftermath of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the year 70. It had been a bloodbath. No one had escaped unaffected. And you know how we are, we humans, after a huge thing like that.....we retreat, we become tribal, and we are very very vulnerable. Blame was being flung around everywhere. Fear and hatred of "the other" and

people using that fear for their own purposes. You know how that works. As it was after 9/11, as it was during the Fort MacMurray fire... Everything else shrinks, somehow. Nothing but that is important. There's a kind of emotional and intellectual vertigo.

When people have received a shock like that, when they feel totally out of control, they are vulnerable and open to anything that will help them understand what happened. and why. We become childlike and passive, ready to trust anyone who seems to have strong answers.

And there is no end to the lineup of charlatans and hucksters and crooks, theological and otherwise, more than willing to spin out a tale of what happened and why, and who to blame and how to stay safe. How to make your world great again, like it was before.

When people are frightened and confused and when they are searching for a sense of control .....they are easy prey and will swallow just about anything, in a way they never would, had the disaster, whatever it is, not happened.

We have to be very careful. Very careful indeed. People will spin out a tale of division They will use the fear to divide people from one another because ....

do you know the Harry Potter series? At one point, Harry has withdrawn from his two best friends. He's under stress and the Bad Guy is powerful. And he's decided to go it alone. Luna Lovegood says to him

"If I were you know who, I'd want you to feel cut off from everyone else. Because if it's just you alone, you're not that much of a threat".

Isolation, the feeling that we're alone, that no one understands, that's one of the first things that signals danger. And that leads to a feeling of threat and suspicion and we start pointing fingers. It's Muslims or its the Romans, or it's women or it's...you know how that goes. It's afillin' the blank kind of thing depending on the time in history but the dynamic is the same.

Fear can lead to division and isolation and blame.

I read a quote this week and now can't remember where but it said

If it isn't filled with hope, someone will fill it with fear"

And so....the holy task of the church in these days

is to fill that void with hope.

That's what both these writers do. They speak boldly into the fear, into the threats of division and hate

and they speak a tale of unity and hope.

This is not IRRELEVANT. This is our future. This is the future of our planet. Right here.

And I look at these women here, spinning, and I think that's exactly what Mark is doing. What Isaiah is doing. Spinning a tale of something different. An alternative reality.

Saying - what you hear from this society....the version of reality that goes "no one cares, you're not good enough, you never will be.... everyone is out to get you, some people are more important than others, look after yourself first....there's no point to anything but you might be happy if you buy this...."

that is a story. spun by a system whose interest is completely for itself. That's a social construct and you don't have to buy it. There's another story, another way, more enduring, more wholesome and holy, more real and more life-giving than that.

Isaiah says....that tale you're told? that you're not good enough, that it's us against them? That old yarn has damaged us. We've become like a filthy cloth.

Not to be too graphic, but the commentators say that the word for that cloth is the word for a menstrual rag. Is it pushing the image too far, do you think, to say that a rag like that is a sign that there is no new life, no pregnancy, nothing new conceived?

Ah, says Mark, NO. This whole thing....this present trouble, the pain we're living through in the world right now? Nightly on the news, around our own dinner tables, in the mirror...this is not the end of anything.... These are birth pangs we're feeling. God's own pain, to bring forth a new world.

We don't know when and we don't know how but God is not finished with us yet. Something good is coming. And we are asked to keep alert, to keep our heads up and wait. Not passively but actively...wait with intent. Wait and be ready when it comes. We're asked to take this yarn that God is spinning....taking the fleeces of our lives, the life of the world, carding and combing and spinning it into something beautiful and useful.....

because as it comes off the wheel it's a bunch of yarn

it's up to us to knit or crochet it into items that will bring beauty to the world, will warm someone's hands or head or feet, things that will help God as she labours to bring into being a new world.

The story we tell ourselves about God, about life, about how things are and what's most important....the yarn we spin matters very much. And a world in pain needs to hear the real story. That God loves the world. Loves it madly. That life is meaningful and there is hope and the present pain is not of God's making, but God even now is spinning it into something beautiful.

I urge you to take up the yarn and make of it a new creation....one dishcloth, one toque, one pair of socks at a time. Amen