

2nd Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.10.17

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3:8-15

Peter wrote this as he lay dying. “Peter,” whom we should understand not as the apostle Peter, the great preacher of the Holy Spirit, the one on whom Christ would establish his church. No, this was another Peter, a different Peter, a later one to come along, likely around the turn of the 1st century to the 2nd century.

This is to say, among other things, that he’d spent a lifetime waiting. He was likely born into waiting, and was now dying while waiting. He’d leaned forward in time knowing that soon, soon, would come the arrival. The cosmic Christ. The second coming!

He’d waited for it. He’d lived uprightly. He’d taught others to do the same—his whole household, perhaps his whole village, almost certainly his whole congregation. For that’s what they had now: congregations. This is later in the story, you see. So now they’d organized themselves, or had begun to anyway. Now their original teacher and savior was no longer among them, had long *not* been among them, in fact, except in the spirit—which wasn’t nothing. Now even the original apostles and earliest teachers had long not been among them. Now even most of their members were Gentile converts, not rooted in Jewish tradition but wholly new to this endeavor of walking with an eternally living, and universally creating, God.

So they had to get clear. They had to get organized. Things would otherwise have been quite a mess if they weren’t to figure who they were (spanning now, as they did, quite a large territory), and what they were about (aiming to spread themselves further still), and how they were to pass on to future generations this sense of identity and purpose—that is for as long as there’d be future generations. They were three generations into future generations as of now, and while it might come to an end at any time, any moment, it might also continue on, for one day is like a thousand years to the Lord and a thousand years are like a day.

As for Peter, though, this early 2nd century Peter, now he lay dying. So he might miss it, and maybe only by moments, but maybe by a millennium. Maybe he’d pass the coming Christ, cross paths with him while they were each on their way, Peter on the way to sheol where he’d await the general resurrection and Christ on the way back to the here and now.

Scoff if you like. I did a bit while I wrote this. Scoff if you like. He anticipated scoffers as faithfully as he anticipated Christ. He wasn’t so generous in his evaluation of them, of course, wasn’t so *gracious*.

And he made no mention of whether it mattered to him that he might miss the coming he'd spent his whole life waiting for. He made no mention of minding that, perhaps bitterly minding that. He seems to have been stern in this way, almost stoic. This wasn't about whether *he'd* have *his* hope fulfilled—to see Jesus in the flesh or at least somehow among the living, to hear him speak, to witness him doing the work of the gospel! This was about whether he'd have lived in such a manner, and had others do the same, that they'd avoid what God had in mind for the unrighteous.

And maybe that was what his hope was all about anyway—not really to see Jesus in the flesh or at least somehow among the living, to hear him speak, to witness him doing the work of the gospel. No, maybe his hope was all about meeting up with Jesus in eternal glory. Maybe for him, this whole deal was all about getting into heaven, not much at all about getting heaving into the world.

You know, when the apostles watched as Christ first went up and away, into the clouds, and two men in white standing nearby asked them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” they explained, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” But that doesn't really clarify the question, does it? Is Christ's return about a constancy in his engagement in the things of this world, or is it about providing an exit for those who are among what Peter called the elect?

I suppose Peter and I would have different answers to that question. I've never preached on this book, not head on; and I imagine this is one reason why.

Peter spoke to us of Christ who is coming, whose coming should not be doubted for its being delayed, and whose coming should be understood and even *felt* as bringing with it judgment and for some condemnation. But, and here's another reason, he never spoke (at least not in this letter) of Christ as *having come*. He didn't write from his deathbed of Christ and how he lived when he lived among us, or how he died when he submitted to the powers and principalities so to subvert the powers and principalities. He was, I have to say, no theologian in that regard; his Christology was rather narrow in its focus. He seems to have had little interest in interpreting what Christ's first coming might have meant and might have enacted, or what Christ's second coming might mean beyond doling out just desserts. He seems to have had no theological idea of what the world might be, or its history and its aim.

In this letter, he never spoke of grace and he only spoke once of love.

To be sure, he spoke of those whom he addressed as “beloved,” and he remembered Jesus to have been declared God's son and beloved, with whom God the father was well pleased. In this vein, he seems to have hoped himself to be someone of whom God would be “well pleased,”

just as he seemed intent that his hearers be people of whom God would be “well pleased.” But his notion of what pleases God, I’ll admit, is different from mine, and his notion of how you manage to live such a life that pleases God seems simply a matter of willpower.

Did I mention that he nowhere mentions grace?

“His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness,” he wrote, “through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.”

He exhorts: “Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.”

And he explains himself: “I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.”

He’s an insistent father in my emotional response to him, and we are all children he means to bring up right.

As for me, I’ve always been more skeptical than obedient.

But...

Something funny has happened in the last few weeks as regards who are the libertines among us and who are the prudes. As the Republican Party readies themselves to elect to the Senate someone whose past sexual mores seem more pagan than pious, and continues to rally, if with periodic reticence, behind a president whose whole way of life is thoroughly devoid of anything resembling righteousness, to say nothing of holiness, the left wing of our society is impatient with any past acts of sexualized power plays of a man at the expense of a woman as if a new prudish piety is our lodestar. (And, yes, I say “our” because I count myself among “the left.”) The old school feminism of Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly is suddenly having a moment once again, and I’m not gonna lie to you, I *like* it.

I know not everyone does. I know there are people here on the left with me that are dismayed that Al Franken has resigned from the Senate, that he seems to have been driven out by neo-puritans of his own party—which is one, though fair, way of understanding it.

For what it's worth, to that I'd say no one is irreplaceable, and he's free to run again and now having shown a public sign of recognition and penitence that much stronger a candidate. When it comes to mocking women for their being women, I'd like a show of repentance and even shame. True public service often requires self-sacrifice. And I'd vote for *that* Al Franken in a heartbeat.

I say all this just so you know where I'm coming from, not to convince you to see it the way I do or out of some conviction that I'm right. It's coming from my gut more than from my intellect so *I'm* not even convinced that it's trustworthy or true. No, I say all this in order to set it aside for a larger point: that talk of righteous living suddenly doesn't seem so suspect.

I'd thought that talk of righteous living was the purview of certain types of Christians—the ones who concerned themselves with not drinking and not dancing, the ones concerned themselves with “sexual purity” and strict gender norms. To them, sin is a personal matter rather than a structural one, and salvation is something that happens to certain individuals (one here, one there, depending on who among us has “made a decision for Christ”) rather than to the whole of creation, its entirety of entangled sin and grace, though with the sin worked out—God through grace working like a potter to knead out air-pockets from clay. Really, I'd thought talk of righteous living was for the Christians on the other side of the modernist divide, the ones who responded early in the 20th century to modern scientific and technological developments with fundamentalist assertions rather than an interplay with the new social norms—or an acquiescence to them.

Suddenly, though, the scandal of apparent unrighteousness is touching down among the very people who rarely thought in such terms, the very people who probably thought the whole notion of “righteous living” was retrograde if not ridiculous. Donald Trump violates norms some of us didn't even know we felt were essential—that is not until he violated them. And now we look around, or at least I look around, and such violation is nearly all I can see, my own sense of righteousness enflamed like never before. Meanwhile, the people usually sensitive to such violation are doing contortions to accept him as anointed of God or at least their last, best hope for restitution, recompense, respect.

I hesitate to count myself among the people to whom Peter, of 2nd Peter, might have something to say. But then I'm honest with myself and I recognize that my disgust at the behavior and thinking of so many of our public figures—from east coast Washington to west

coast Hollywood, from high art New York to corporate America to really wherever power aggregates to be grabbed after and abused—is something I so deeply feel that it borders on the religious.

I am waiting for the powerfully good to come and to establish itself in our midst so that everything of history and human arranging and natural ordering might line up in its light and might measure itself relative to this, this which is absolute. I am waiting for shame to come to those who are shameless. I am waiting for this reckoning.

I'm *waiting*.

Good thing we're amidst the season of waiting. Good thing we're here with Peter, this champion waiter. But our Advent waiting is more complicated than his was, for while he awaited a coming in the future, an arrival that he'd concluded would amount to a cataclysmic and purging end, we also await a coming that has already come, and that has come as a thing very much of this world. A baby! A most needy thing that most marshals our need to serve that need. A baby, whom we must care for that it might live, that it might thrive, that it would otherwise wither and perish. A baby, the most unmistakably earthy thing us human beings ever are. A baby. He's coming, by grace that we might love him.

We await this thing that has already happened that we might be once again called back unto the things of this world—though also in the light that there is an eternity that makes similar demands. We are to live rightly—though not necessarily to justify our place in proximity to God but to participate in the coming for which wait before it's even fully here. We are to strive for righteousness—though not to “get into heaven” but to get heaven into the world. We are to seek God's grace that we might exude God's holiness, an assertion that we on the Christian left might enjoy more fully saying, and perhaps now is our moment.

Granted, this is no clear and easy thing to establish for ourselves. Yes, Peter of 2nd Peter seems to have felt it to be otherwise; he seems to have been quite sure what righteous living looks like, what holy living looks like. (Ironically, central to it is was not living according to your lust.) And I envy him that, but I also doubt him that, and I wonder if you do too. The more I become wise to the world, the more it seems to me simply the case that godly living amidst the world is a daily demand and a dodgy one. It requires care. It requires prayer. It requires community and correction. It requires discernment and decision and always, always forgiveness.

For all this, we might rejoice, then, in the notion that the time we've been given is but the Lord's patience in our regard. These days, though, patience is but one more puzzle. With the news happening so fast, with the revelations of wrongdoing coming from all sides and in all manner of public and professional life, and with the attendant demands that someone *do*

something about it all, before the special election, before the tax bill is signed, before the government shuts down, do something, do something: patience feels almost like an absurdity. We've got no time for patience! We've got to *do* something.

Our whole society is roiling in a primitive dynamic, a regressive, reactive dynamic that flows from the top, this demented father who demands our constant attention and our strong reaction, regardless of whether it's positive or negative, though I think preferring the negative because that signals to his thinking that he's *strong*.

But we've got another top, another father, if you will—whose strength is love, whose attention is grace, whose constancy is faithfulness, and whose will is good. We may be patient about his coming to us in transcendence. But let's also be persistent in living this coming now.

Let righteousness be ours, then. Let holiness fill our living. Be upright and blameless, beloveds of Monterey. Resist what is evil, and hold fast to what is good. Prepare a way for the Lord in the world, and follow this Lord in the plain light of day. Get up to one of our wooded Berkshire Hills and be a herald of the Lord's tidings. Lift up your voice. Do not fear. There are some sudden vacancies in the great cloud of witnesses the world has come to expect. Let's fill these, then, with our show of faithful waiting and holy living.

We can do this. I'm as sure as 2nd Peter ever was. But we'll do so reliant on Christ's unfailing grace.

Thanks be to God.