

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York 10964
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2006 10:00 A.M.

Reflection:

When the Pharisees heard how he bested the Sadducees, they gathered their forces for an assault. One of their religion scholars spoke for them, posing a question they hoped would show him up: "Teacher, which commandment in God's law is the most important?"

Jesus said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the prophets hangs from them." - Matthew, Chapter 22



Readings: Isaiah 9:2-4; 6-7
 The Gospel According to Luke: Luke 2:1 – 14 (15-20)

Hymns: #38 It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
 #25 Away in a Manger
 #47 Still, Still, Still

Before the Light or the Dark
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Do you think it is possible to go before – before the beginning, that is? For a life form, with all life as we know it, destined to be travelers in the middle – we are much more inclined toward the “hereafter” than the “here-before.” While both are equally inaccessible, I guess it’s just our way to think of ourselves as moving forward, somewhat in control.

Yet, much of our biblical history and faith traditions are based on the notion of returning home in some way. *Teshuvah* – returning home following a period of repentance. Is that what this time is about, repentance, cleansing, preparation?

Well, I’m not all that sure, but what is true is that In our attempts to reconcile the “here,” we have to acknowledge the struggle of life upon a celestial body, no matter how beautiful from up close or far away it may appear. Returning to the Hebrew for some help with the notion of life and struggle we look at the word *hchai*, Hebrew for life – and we turn to where it appears in Job 38:39 for a clue:

"Will you hunt prey for the lion and will you fill the stomach of the young lion?"

In this verse the word "stomach" is the Hebrew word *hchai*. Life. What does the stomach have to do with life? For us, it is very uncommon for anyone to experience true physical hunger but this was an all too often experience for the

Ancient Hebrews, and still too real for too many today, as uncommon as it may be. To the Ancient Hebrews life was seen as a full stomach while an empty stomach is seen was death.

Is it that the hunger that propels us forward to “life” more readily careening toward the unknown, accelerated by some fear of “death?”

I don't know. I read about Isaiah and his oracles written in the Eighth Century BCE, during the reign of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. At the time his ministry began, a period of relative peace and stability was coming into jeopardy.. Assyria was threatening and a foreboding sense of doom intensifying. Just like the darkness of the mind prior to its first conscious thought, oblivion and darkness seemed to be at the doorstep of Judah and Jerusalem.

“Out of the darkness, O Lord,” “Out of the darkness...” it must have been like a mantra, growing in terror as the times became worse. Somehow praying for a stop to the degradation of “life” and “future” more and more coming into the hands of the Assyrians -- at the ever increasing incompetent hands of the kings. Prayers, for a while, must have been seen more as preparing for the end.

Why, why would this be happening, they must have thought. And the prophet's oracles – Isaiah's warnings - were the voice of the Lord: sin, lack of faithfulness, breaks in the code of the Jewish law – God was angry and sending the Assyrians to smite the nation. The upper classes were falling deeper into religious disloyalty, social injustice, and depravity... this was not the Law of Moses.

So, as they always do, the faithful prayed to God to protect them – to preserve their lives as long as possible. And the oracle that we read this morning was about the hope of a nation for a return to peace and prosperity: it is an oracle that was written and spoken for the ascendancy of a new king, some think Ahaz, others Hezekiah. Regardless, it was about the expectation that things were going to get better, to be like they were, this was going to be the king to end all kings, the ruler to crush our enemies and to lead us forward so we could get back to where we were.

IF greatness is about stasis, getting stronger while staying in place – the least amount of thought brings the folly of such thinking into focus. It points – maybe – to the Sermon on the Mount – the idea not of power and might and greatness – but of humility and how the humble inherit the earth of God's creation, “earth” being all that God has made and has to offer.

Aside from all this, if we look at our history, I think that unless we find a way to turn time into a kaleidoscopic series of intertwined and inchoate elements that broaden the vision without regard to direction we will be confined to before, now, later – stuck in a temporal sort of unbreakable inaccurate cycle. Is it a wonder then that we talk in such language: “moving forward,” “on the rise,” “stay the

course,” “upward bound,” or in the Latin motto of my high school, “ad astra per aspera” – “to the stars through difficulties.” Always striving forward...upward and forward – maybe another way of saying “away from?”

Any wonder then that the gospel writers, beginning their narratives 50 – 75 years after Jesus’ death wrote in terms of the promise of eternal life and salvation for those who, like the Hebrews of Isaiah’s time, had been oppressed by invading forces and governing bodies? Any wonder at all that the evangelists, like Matthew who was a Jew and knew the Torah – any wonder that the prophecy of Isaiah became the fulfillment of the prophecy of a time 750 years later? Just think of the excitement and assurance of Isaiah’s words to the early Christians when they were read or remembered Isaiah’s prophecy”

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Guardian, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

A return of justice and righteousness and peace, lost long ago, perhaps in that garden East of Eden. Jesus was to become for many the fulfillment of the prophecy and return to justice and righteousness and peace.

And here, somewhere in the middle, here is the birth of Jesus. Those around him gathered close to him because they sought this kingdom, as they had known kingdoms before, except now they would be a part of it – they would be the ones in charge, turning things on their heads. Remember how often Jesus had to remind them that his kingdom was not of this world? Jesus had come from a place – a before place and tried to get the message across: the kingdom of God is at hand. It’s here. Now. We come from the same place, here, now, with Jesus as at any time in what we call the passage and recording of time.

You know, I think Jesus knew how risky his ministry was, how dangerous and potentially life-threatening it would ultimately be. However, I don’t think he thought he was going to die when he did or as he did. He obviously was willing to give his life in the name of his faith and relationship to God, but I think he hoped that people would “get it,” that God was here now, inside and all around, that there was no dominion over God, that all these powers and principalities were waning and passing. That the Law of Moses, the law of compassion, justice, and right was what God was calling the faithful to. And, not just for a future or to return to the past, but for the present. I think he expected to be around for a while, maybe see some of what he worked for happen, maybe see his children, if he had any, become a PK – a pastor’s kid.

Do you remember the Scriptures, Matthew once again, chapter 6:34

"So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Our preoccupation with tomorrow, when there is ample work to do today. And what of the birth of Jesus. Who is Jesus? All those who are in need. All those marginalized, oppressed, of heavy heart, lonely, worn and worn-out. The young people, the not so young, the lost, the found --- all these are the Jesus we seek each day. Simply, we and those we meet are Jesus. Namasthe!

The message of Jesus's birth, before ever being written, rewritten, wonderfully woven into mythic dimensions – yet redacted and revised with always one central truth: the message of Jesus' birth is that love is so powerful in a world so in need of that love, that it will be fought by many who profit from the oppression, fought by some to the point of persecution, exclusion, and even death. Love, God, does overcome all adversity. The baby Jesus did it just to show us how!

The message, for me – maybe for you – is that the “beforeafter” and the “hereafter” – the pre and post light: do not exist as we think we know them. The “I Am” to which God referred Godself when Moses sought God's name, the “I Am” is the great present and presence of God. It is what Jesus knew and what he tried to teach his disciples and all of us who would be changed by his teachings, that God is not a prize to be feared out of the past and sought in the future. God is now. And, God is Love. Love. Now.

Christmas, from the Old English meaning of Mass of Christ, is that. A remembrance of who we are and what we become when we take on Christ and his teachings. When we do such a thing, we become the most powerful of agents for justice and change and we acknowledge our being beyond any measures or time encapsulations. We are / as / God is / I Am.

What a gift to receive and to give to others. What a struggle and what a blessing.

Such is life with Jesus and those who seek Jesus *in* their lives.

May this Christmas and remembrance of Jesus bring you ever more closely to the love of others in this day and all the days we share.

Merry Christmas – merry Mass of Christ.