

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York

Sunday, November 25, 2007

On things of the season...

Wa, vae, oa, weh, wai, fe, gwae, vay – woe!

In any language, woe is woe! There is serious misfortune afoot when woe is cast in your direction. Especially if you are the one chosen to lead the faithful or those trying to be faithful – and you've been messing up!

Who better than Jeremiah to be casting threats of this nature upon the ineffective shepherds: kings and other leaders of Israel who had taken the nation astray. In this case, it is Zedekiah who has captured the wrath of God through Jeremiah for his insistence on challenging the Babylonians. We all know the outcome of that decision – the destruction of the temple and captivity for 50 some odd years.

History is filled with examples of the folly of leaders, and Jeremiah was right on target with his prophesy about the wrong-headed strategy that pitted the Jews against Babylonia. Still, what if Jeremiah had been wrong. What if Zedekiah's decision had proven to be correct and ushered in a glorious and unprecedented reign for Judah and the Hebrews?

I can't too often recall books written about prophets who get it all wrong. We read about their mistakes at times, yes, but failed prophets? Think about it. There is no "Book of Errors" about the unnamed prophet who never had a correct prophecy. Sort of the "Wrong Way Corrigan" of antiquities. In fact, you never knew till long after the prophesy – about its accuracy. The way of ancient times was to decide **after events** who was the real prophet and who wasn't: if the prophets predictions proved correct, that individual became a prophet of note. If they didn't come true – well, you never heard of them again.

Adding to the complication is the counterfactual effect: If you listened to the prophet and everything turned out ok, how would you ever have known if it would have turned out just fine – sans prophet?!

Is that really so different than in our own history? Think for a second of a great leader in your mind. Then think of all those who attempted to lead (or have even led) but never made the headlines because their leadership was, well, milquetoast!

As great of an historian any of us might be, intellectual limitations require that we filter out certain information, free up the memory, and – at best – maintain a

sampling of what has transpired in the course of human history. We seek pinnacles, high points, successes, achievements - and refer to the lows mostly in terms of examples of what to avoid or ways in which our lives have improved. So there is no way to keep track of it all, and rightly or wrongly so – what we remember most is what gets our attention.

Life might be much simpler if that were not so!

Back to the Old Testament, reflecting events primarily between the 12th and 2nd Century BCE consistently presents the efforts of the Hebrews and their forebears to please God so that God's judgment would be sweet – or at least not wrathful. Some might say it is as much about faithfulness as it is about fear and forgetfulness.

It is not such a great leap for me, for me – to say that God is not a changing God. I get nervous with an Almighty that is one way today and another tomorrow.

Instead, it seems to me that the God who was seen as the cause for destruction or reward referred to in the Old Testament was more a reflection of the limitations of the leaders and their interpretations of the events – rather than God who is described at differing times as anywhere from absent to inclined toward annihilating creation – or parts of it.

I have to wonder if, in fact, the description of God that we have rooted in our very core is the one that has been defined by the success of those to predict events, attributing those events to God, and in the process creating a “definition” of God.

It is a definition of God based on events over the course of human history, incomplete, misinterpreted, and based on a time less than seconds in the continuum of the cosmic calendar of creation.

It certainly fits the nature of the human ego to come late to the party of creation and somehow be assured and insistent in its assessment of all that has transpired long before we were here.

And, that is not to fault us or our make-up, or to diminish all those who have gone before. It does point to the challenges though of making sense – making truth – out of the information that has cascaded down upon us over the millennia.

When a computer gets overloaded with too much information that or becomes overly fragmented, it can corrupt the machine and way it operates its programs. At times, a simple reboot makes all the difference. At other times, the computer needs to be reformatted – everything erased and started over again, the corruption and fragmentation being simply beyond repair – or just requiring more work to fix than it is to start anew.

Well, we have some historical events attributed to God about restarting humanity, wiping it out with just a few remaining to start over, such as in the great flood of Noah or the destruction of cities like Sodom and Gomorrah – both events most likely the result of geophysical changes than a vengeful God initiating the events. After all, humans do like cognitive balance, and what better way to achieve it in the face of the unknown than to attribute it to God, especially to make a point.

Whether you believe the narratives in literal or interpretive ways, the idea of “restarting,” however was there long before it became common in computer-ese. And, as we enter into the Advent season, I can’t help thinking of it as a time, long ago, that might not have been very different from the more difficult events of our times today – a time then, as now, that called for a new start, a new way of being and being with God, a departure from the old prophet-driven description of God based on observance of the universe and human events...

To the “original” God, so to speak – or at least the beginning of a journey back to God who invites us to appear before God, knowing that God’s love and forgiveness is unconditional and freely-given.

As Christians, we believe that this God who perhaps was tired of having so many speak for her, decided to speak for herself in the events leading to and culminating in the birth of Jesus.

This is quite a change; a change of cosmic-plus dimensions.

And, in the Lucan narrative of this morning we enter the window of eternity, opened in the section of Luke known as the *Benedictus*, the canticle that unites Zechariah with his tongue and hearing – in the events surrounding birth of his and Elizabeth’s son, John the Baptist.

You recall that Zechariah was struck speechless and without hearing when he seemed less than convinced of the Archangel Gabriel’s words to him that his wife would bear a son. Finally, just prior to this morning’s reading – he gets it – and his speech and hearing are returned.

Luke’s description of Zechariah’s words, the *Benedictus* fall into two parts. The first (verses 68-75) is a song of thanksgiving for the realization of the [Messianic](#) hopes of the [Jewish](#) nation; but to such realization is given a characteristically Christian tone.

Once more, as in the former times in the family of David, there would be a power to defend the nation against its enemies but in a higher and spiritual sense.

The description of the horn is an allusion to it as a sign of power, and the "horn of salvation" signifies the power of a mighty deliverance, a deliverance that was now at hand, and was pointed to by Zechariah as the fulfillment of God's oath to

[Abraham](#); a fulfillment not for the sake of worldly power, but that "we may serve God without fear, in holiness and justice all our days".

The world – through God and these events – was rebooting in ways that continue to unfold today.

The second part of the canticle is an address by Zechariah to his own son, who was to take so important a part in the scheme of the Redemption; for he was to be a prophet, and to preach the remission of sins before the coming or the Dawn from on high. The prophecy that he was to "go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76) was of course an allusion to the well-known words of [Isaiah 40:3](#) which John himself afterwards applied to his own mission ([John 1:23](#)), and which all three [Synoptic Gospels](#) adopt ([Matt 3:3](#); [Mark 1:2](#); [Luke 3:4](#)).

There are probably some exceptions to what I am about to say, but I think that it is true that John the Baptist was the last to be called prophet in the New Testament, with the exception to the occasional reference to Jesus, as prophet.

I have spoken of this before, the notion that with the Jesus the need for prophets, that imperfect way of discerning God based on "good" or "bad" events, pleasure or punishment, plenty or want – was gone.

Through the birth of Jesus, God intervened in the course of eternity in a way that laid it all out, once and for all: "Be still and know that I am God." Be still and know that you are loved and forgiven. Be still and know that a way has been prepared for you to enter into this promise – a promise of peace and love that far exceeds your understanding. Jesus, this Jesus of Mary and Joseph, cousin of John, is the Way.

No more predictions or guesses. It is done.

A couple of comments:

- (1) While there are some within the broadness of "Christianity" who believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation – I don't. I believe that if we ever get to the core of truth in any faith tradition, we will find the same God we find in Christianity – and a path just as effective in reaching home.
- (2) On forgiveness. The word refers to getting back to the "time before" to "give back the fore," the original. Although it is used as an indication of having our wrongs erased, it is much more than that. It is returning to a time or place before those wrongs even existed! That place, for me, is back at the origin – in the being of our Creator. Forgiveness for me is more of directionality, a movement – than it is a static cleansing.

- (3) Repentance. Bowed heads, sack-clothes, beating of the chests – maybe in the times of the prophets, but in the time of Jesus it refers to coming before God as you are, not as some denied-image of reality, crafted for acceptance and praise – but as we are, knowing that God created us, as we are – imperfect and in need of God (not any one religion’s) perfection.

Such things are incredibly Good News. It means that the “kindom of God,” the “Reign of God” through Jesus the Christ has been announced. It has been witnessed to. It is here and now – even if we as a world have not caught up to the truth: it has arrived.

“The kindom of God is at hand.”

This is why any impediment to making the promise available to all humanity has to be removed. We no longer need prophets to predict and ages to pass before we know what was right or wrong, whether God’s will or not.

The days of the prophets of old have gone. The language of “woe” has been replaced with the language of the heart of Jesus. We are blessed and called to bring that beating heart into the world.

It is the advent that is already here, that grips us in grace and joy, no longer dictated by events of a human race looking for answers.

The kindom of God is at hand.

Let me close with his quote that I found along the way:

"I believe that one of the great, unique features of Christianity is that it is a religion of God coming down to us, rather. Christianity is light shining in the darkness, which destroys the darkness. It is not the darkness trying to become light. It is being transformed by God's (de-)lightful presence among us."

May the Shekinah, God’s delightful shimmering presence be with you throughout this Advent Season and beyond.