

A VOICE SAYS “CRY OUT!”

St Andrew's UC, Sudbury; December 6, 2009

Isaiah 40:1-11

It's happening.

There's no stopping it now.

Last Sunday was the first day of Advent

and there's real snow on the ground

and so for sure Christmas is going to happen.

We're in countdown mode:

the Christmas clock is ticking—

How many shopping days till Christmas?

How many parties and concerts and Christmas letters?

How many services and gatherings and special events?

We have so many miles to go before we sleep,

so many Christmas promises to keep!

Every year, for decades now, I have made a vow

to light a candle every Advent evening

and then to sit quietly for a bit—

I know *I* need that flicker of holy Presence

especially during this busy season.

I never manage to keep that vow completely

and this year I only located my Advent candles yesterday.

I have, however, stolen a few moments

to play Christmas music on the piano.

I know it's not even liturgically legal

to play Christmas carols during Advent—

we're supposed to wait till Christmas Eve

and then carry on for the twelve days of Christmas—

but Christmas has a way of catching us up and winding us up

long before the day gets here.

We plan and prepare and anticipate.

We do all the familiar things.

We observe our happy traditions.

We bake and decorate and bring in the tree.

All good.

Let me assure you, I am not the Reverend Grinch!
But when I think about that prophetic Advent voice
 that calls to us from that ancient book of the prophet Isaiah—
 well, then I have to haul myself back
 from thinking and doing Christmas...
back into Advent,
 that season of waiting and listening and preparing
 for the coming again of holy Presence in our midst.
I find myself wondering, like the prophet,
 what it is that I want to say in this time and place.
 What is the right word for the season?
The heavenly Voice continues to speak as it spoke to the prophet:
 Cry out, it says, *Cry out!*

But what shall I cry out?
What is it that the world around us needs to hear?
What do *we* need to hear on this day, in this season?
Do we simply fill up the four weeks of Advent
 by practicing for Christmas?
Is it enough to go around saying *Merry Christmas*
 and singing *Silver Bells*?
Does it satisfy our deepest longings
 to set out the manger scene and address the Christmas cards?

The prophet of this morning's Hebrew Scripture reading
 asks a similar question.
Oh, he's not planning for Christmas, of course—
 we're talking about an era before Jesus—
but he's certainly looking to locate his prophetic voice
and, like any good prophet, he considers the whole year to be Advent—
 the time of waiting and preparing for the realm of God.
Cry out! he hears the heavenly voice command.

Cry out?
What, *what* shall I cry? the prophet asks.
 What is the right word for this time?
 Look at your people, God—they have no heart left!
 They have no voice left to say *anything* for you.

Why not?

What has been going on with these people of God
that they have become so disheartened,
so emptied of praise,
so disconnected from their God and their faith...
so speechless?

Well, here's their story—as much as we can know of it:
It's been decades since Solomon's temple in Jerusalem was torched
and burned to the ground.
Decades since the exiles were carried off on the 1500-km trek to Babylon,
torn away from their sacred places of community.
Back home in Judah,
the fabric of Hebrew society has been ripped and shredded.
The people left behind by the marauding Babylonian armies
are scattered and fractured,
the feeble candles of hope flickering out one by one.

And in Babylon?
Where the exiled Jews reside?
While it's true that they have some status as “recognized foreigners,”
they're finding it awfully hard to swim against the current
when there's an altar to a Babylonian god on every busy street corner.
Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is in construction mode:
he's got crews working overtime to rebuild his capital city
and his great temples are made ever more imposing
with fine-grained timber, gold and silver overlay, and glittering gemstones.
The familiar pungent aroma of incense floats to the nostrils,
and the sheep and bulls brought for sacrifice
aren't all that different from the ones
of the old Jerusalem temple traditions.

Yes, it's hard to stay faithful to Yahweh.
As the years of exile march on,
many of the Jewish exiles begin to attach themselves
to these Babylonian cults and to join in their rites.
So much so that, when the day of liberation comes (after fifty years),
a good number of the exiles opt to *stay* in Babylon!
Their vision of God has blurred.
They're not really sure who God is anymore
and they don't have a sense that God is leading them *anywhere!*

Small wonder, then, that the prophet asks *What shall I cry?*
What, indeed?

For the people are as grass,
 their constancy is like the flower of the field.

They are drooping and lifeless.
These are God's beloved, the people of the covenant.
They have no place left to go.
And they have nothing left to say.

And we?

Are we too suffering from some sort of "spiritual laryngitis"?

I think we too have our versions of Babylonian towers—
 big box buildings where we get sucked into a crazy kind of worship
 that blinds us to what is *really* important in our living
 and has us paying in more ways than one for what we carry home.

And even our religious observances
 have been so co-opted by the dominant culture
 that the very Christmas story we are gearing up for
 is in danger of losing *its* voice....

That sweet little babe lying on lambskin in a manger,
 with his pretty young mother gazing down in rapt adoration,
 all surrounded by angelic voices and worshiping shepherds—
it's all so serene and lovely and candlelit—
 like a gentle whisper.....

Cry out! says the voice from heaven.

 This world doesn't need whispers right now.
 This world needs a proclamation of hope.
 We need a proclamation of hope—
a sure and certain voice
 that speaks out with strength in our Babylonian places.

I am convinced that strong voice is in us.

Oh, it's hard to locate sometimes.

When I watch the television news
 or read the headlines on my computer screen—
the suicide attacks, a corrupt election process, the listless orphans,
 another dead soldier, the drowned and buried bodies after one more
natural disaster—

and when I listen to the stories of broken relationship and fractured community—
when all these things hit me like a huge wave
and the only light in the room is coming
from one little candle of peace, flickering desperately,
I don't feel any big proclamations bursting out of me.
I just feel like crying.
How would my candle fare in Israel/Palestine, I wonder.
Or in Zimbabwe, or on the streets of Winnipeg?
Or where two members of the same church
have not spoken to one another for months?.....
How big is my hope for peace, for transformation, for the kingdom of God?
Where do I find the voice to say with conviction,
Joy to the world! the Lord is come!
Glory to God in the highest and, on earth, peace and goodwill!

I can identify with that prophet
who was having trouble finding the strength for proclamation.
Maybe we all can.
And yet—
God doesn't let us off the hook.
Even when we are feeling heavy,
especially when we are feeling disheartened and hopeless,
we are called to hope.
Get yourself up on a high mountain somewhere—
find a soapbox and start shouting.
You are God's beloved. Chosen.
You are the herald of good tidings!
Don't be afraid to lift up your voice.
Start making noise about how God is at work in the midst of the darkness!

Well. That's what the Spirit said to the prophet, anyway.
God told the prophet to get out there
and do what he was called to do.
I wonder if we realize the power of the message that is ours.
This is the season for talking about love and the birth of a baby—
vulnerability and gentleness,
peace and starry-eyed wonder....
If theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are right
in their interpretation of the biblical Christmas stories,

then we would have to own that our traditions
have made of that first Christmas
a night so silent that one might be forgiven for missing the message.
Borg and Crossan insist that the manger scene is a point of conflict:
a head-on collision between the world's empire and God's kingdom.
When the gospel writers record that Jesus was born
Saviour and King and Lord and Son of God,
they are not just stating the obvious about this Child anointed by God.
They are, rather, declaring, proclaiming, yelling with very loud voices
that *this* Child is going to confront the kingdoms of this world
and bring them down.

The kingdoms of this world function on violence.
That's how empire works.
It's the human way of doing political and economic
and even religious business.
It accomplishes a certain kind of peace all right,
but it does it through victory and violence and war.
The Roman emperor who was in power when Jesus was born
also had a string of titles attached to his name:
(they will sound familiar to you, I am sure)
Saviour of the world, Lord, Redeemer, Son of God.

To use any of these names for that little newborn Jew in the manger
was high treason.
The gospel writers did not do so lightly.
What they were doing was getting up on a soapbox
and crying out that this was not a gently flickering candle
but the Light of the world.

The Light of the world.
The Christ-Child,
who would speak and live and die with such power
that the darkness would not be able to snuff him out.

That is the Light that dwells in us
and shines down the dark tunnels of our world.
That is the Bread of Life that nurtures us at this Table
and gives us strength to cry out.
That is the Spirit that gives us the courage to hope

and to proclaim to the world
that we serve the Living God whose peaceable kingdom *will* come.

Maybe our proclamation will sound ridiculous.

Maybe Jesus doesn't look very powerful

compared to the gods we see around us:

consumerism and the lust for oil and military power,

the relentless war machine,

the religious zealotry that tears humanity apart.

And yet—

God doesn't let us off the hook:

that is precisely what the people of God are commissioned to do:

to proclaim Gods compassion and care for all people

and to insist that in *this* is the power that will transform the world

and establish peace forever.

May it be so.

And may we find our voices to cry out.