

Renewing Our Resolve

Isaiah 35:3-4; Matthew 11:2-6

You have invested your full energy in your Candidate's campaign. You are passionate about your Candidate's promise to make our world a better place. Many around you disagree sharply with you, and some of them have turned against you personally, even bitterly. You've paid a social price to support your Candidate, although you have also enjoyed the camaraderie of other supporters. That's one of your major inspirations, in fact – the company of people who share your passion for your Candidate. You cheer each other on. When your opponents get louder, you try at first to reason with them, but soon you realize that nothing you can say will change their mind. They hate your Candidate viscerally. As Blaise Pascal so trenchantly observed: "The heart has reasons that reason cannot understand."

You are well into the campaign when disaster strikes. You suddenly have to leave your friends and the campaign, due to an unexpected turn of events. Apart from the energy of your friends, and away from the campaign's adrenaline, you begin to waver. Your certainty of your Candidate's imminent victory diminishes. You begin to wonder if your Candidate is *really* the ticket to making the world better.

This thought experiment resonates deeply for us after a divisive, brutal national election campaign. Some of us invested greatly in promoting our candidate of choice, and in the warm company of people who thought like us, it seemed that our candidate was sure to win. Talking to people who supported the other candidate grew increasingly difficult; we were just talking past each other. We didn't really hear one another. And suddenly the election is over, but the bruises and impasses remain.

Perhaps you guessed that the Candidate I was speaking about a moment ago is named neither Trump nor Clinton. It is Jesus. And "you" are John the Baptist. You have been at the forefront of Jesus' campaign. Your rallies draw great crowds, as you proclaim your message with fiery urgency. You are so central to Jesus' "kingdom campaign" that some people confuse the two of you. But as he rises in public acclaim, you begin to fade, which is fine with you. You know that Jesus is the Messiah, not you. Some from your inner circle leave you to follow him, but others still stick with you. You're still all in with Jesus, when suddenly everything turns badly for you. You've been speaking truth to power, which is what prophets are supposed to do, and the king responds by throwing you in prison. You are cut off from your team, with all of its encouragement, and you begin to wonder if all this talk about the kingdom being so near is just so much hot air. You begin to question whether Jesus is Messiah after all. You've invested so much for him; was it all for nothing?

Your arch-enemy Herod has won the day. You told the truth, but rather than setting you free, it landed you in prison. You summon your friends, and you ask them to go check on Jesus: Is he *really* the Messiah? Is the kingdom of God *really* breaking in? Or did we get our hopes up for nothing?

Jesus is famous for responding to questions indirectly – if he even responds to them at all. True to form, when John's disciples ask Jesus a simple "Yes or No" question, he responds by redirecting them to become reporters – tell John all that I am doing and saying: "The blind see; the lame walk; lepers are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor are getting

good news.” In other words, Jesus is sticking to the program he announced at the outset of his ministry, back in his hometown. If you’re looking for something more, you’ll not find it. But if you think it’s somehow less, be assured that we are still on track. Jesus does not bait and switch.

Notice who lie at the center of Jesus’ concern – the marginalized. The shunned. The insecure. The weak. The nameless. The voiceless. The stranger. He doesn’t pick his target population on a whim; rather, he is fulfilling the Messianic mandate announced by prophets long before.

As we went through our recent election campaign, much was said about bringing down the political elite from entrenched positions of power. To whose benefit? The average middle-class American. One party sought to be more inclusive of people on the margins, but especially in terms of economics, candidates at every level and in both parties pitched themselves as champions of the middle. One side sought to curry the favor of the middle by promising to dismantle policies that have funneled resources to those on the margins, and to pour them back into the middle class where they say they rightly belong. The other tried to appeal to the middle class by promising to make the wealthy share more of what they have with the rest of us.

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God has very different priorities. Those on the bottom, not on the top or in the middle, are his first concern: the stranger, the leper, the poor. In Jesus’ program, the least get first priority.

When we become politically captivated by protecting the interests and increasing the well-being of those in the middle, we run a real danger of losing sight of our calling as proclaimers of God’s good news for the poor and marginalized. There are some who theologize middle-class politics with something called the “prosperity Gospel,” declaring that God wants *you* to be well off. And, of course, as *you* are more well off, you can give more to our ministry so *we* can be more well off. But Jesus shows us a very different way, welcoming those who have nothing to give but their thanks, and making uncomfortable those who have much they could give.

Last week one of my colleagues and I met with the leaders of a congregation that has aimed its outreach at the truly needy, to those for whom staying alive is itself a major challenge. They told us about the economic challenges their church faces because it invests its outreach in people who have nothing to contribute to the church’s operating expenses. Friends, it’s called bearing the cross.

Jesus closes our passage by saying, in effect, “You are blessed if you don’t find my work and message offensive.” You are blessed if you join me in embracing the stranger, the outcast, and those whom society considers unclean. The path to true blessing aims not to improve our own welfare, but to reach out to others who are less privileged.

There is no blessing in trying to force our way higher up in line when we feel that others have stepped in line ahead of us. Yet our politicians have long begun their appeal by asking us, “Are you better off now than you used to be? Have you moved forward in line, or fallen back? If you’ve made no progress, or fallen back in line, vote for me, and I’ll fix that for you.” Jesus would be a disaster as a political candidate in our world.

Isaiah speaks to the fearful in our other text: “Be strong! Set aside your fear! God will save you, you can count on it!” Isaiah is a royal prophet, speaking in the halls of power. The

elite fear that they will lose what they have if they don't defend it vigorously. They are trying to preserve their privilege, and it's wearing them out. The passage continues beyond our short reading to detail how the poor and suffering are lifted up in God's economy: "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ... the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongues of the speechless sing for joy." Sound familiar? It's precisely what Jesus was doing when John's disciples visited. And, Isaiah says, because God is doing this, you can let go of your fear-based politics. You can set aside the anxiety-driven programs built on the assumption that you have to put your own interests first to assure your own welfare.

I heard this week that the website "Dictionary.com" has chosen as its 2016 word of the year *xenophobia* – "fear of strangers." It is the dark side of "looking out for number one" – we fear the stranger who might prosper at our expense, even though we know that as God's people we are called to welcome the stranger, just as God in Christ welcomes us.

"Us-first" politics is not new in 2016. It took on some new shape in this year's election campaigns, but it is basically the same thing we have always been sold by our politicians. We expect them to tell us how they'll make things better for us. The call and work of Jesus to care first for others is utterly foreign to our politics.

Some among us are elated by this year's election results. Many of us are distraught over them. That candidates win elections by appealing to self-interest more effectively than their opponents did should surprise no-one. What surfaced in new ways this year was the intensity of public vitriol, disdain, and vilification of those who think or look different from us. As awful as that is, at least it uncovers how ready we are to tear down others in order to promote ourselves. It shows just how much we need to be evangelized by the evangel that Jesus proclaimed: good news for the poor and outcast and stranger. More than ever, this must be the heart of our message as his church.

Perhaps, like John and his disciples, we have flagged in our zeal for Jesus' program, and need a jolt to renew our resolve to be, as our *Book of Order* puts it, "Christ's faithful evangelist." If this year's political campaigns and elections have shaken us up, could that shaking lead us to redouble our commitment to "proclaiming together the Gospel truly in word and deed," as our presbytery mission statement declares?

What would an Investigating Committee report if they, like John's disciples checking on Jesus, came to see how WE are doing with OUR calling? (That's what John would have called it had he been Presbyterian.) What if WE were asked, "Is this truly a church of Jesus Christ, or should we look for another?"

Isaiah says, "Strengthen your weak hands; make firm your feeble knees." Why? Because God can be counted on to fulfill all the promises of the coming kingdom, no matter how long we have to wait to see them fulfilled. Jesus points out to John's disciples, "See? God is breaking in to our world. Go tell John about it, so he knows that our mission is right on track."

Beloved, no matter what happens in our socio-economic and political surroundings, the Spirit of God is still at work among us and around us with Good News for the poor and lost and broken. The kingdom of God is nearer than we think. This is our Advent proclamation. Advent is precisely the medicine we need to be healed from the wounds of political war. Thank God that Advent always follows close on the heels of our national elections! Let us renew our resolve to be and to do what God has called us to be and to do, in the power of the Spirit. Amen!