

**The Lessons Appointed for Use
on
Third Sunday of Advent**



**Year B
RCL**

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
John 1:6-8,19-28

The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring
up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

John 1:6-8,19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet

Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

SERMON

I want to talk today about the work of a prophet and their incalculable value. I worry that we read from the prophetic Old Testament books because they offer comforting and hopeful thoughts in proper King James English. There is much, much more than that to the work of a prophet. A prophet speaks to heal a people. From the words of a prophet, the world itself can be returned to the will of its Maker.

The world in which we live does its best to devise ways of living fruitful, peaceful lives. Inevitably, though, because we are flawed creatures, our efforts go off the track. A prophet reminds us of three principles. Write these three principles upon your heart, church.

- 1. God's act of creation was for good;**
- 2. Our implementation of God's plan is flawed because we are flawed;**

3. Nevertheless, our job is to press for the transformation of this world to more accurately reflect God's intention and that can be done because God wills it.

Today, I want to look at two items from contemporary news. First, we bade farewell this week to a brave young policewoman. She was a month shy of her second anniversary with the Charleston Police Department when she was shot in the face while answering a PARKING complaint.

Second, in March, Brianna Taylor, a young EMT in Louisville, was killed by Louisville police in a tragically flawed warrant service. Her boyfriend heard a noise at their door in the middle of the night and opened fire. The police returned fire, killing Taylor.

As different as these two encounters were, they both reflect the teaching of our society about violence. I well remember the first time I held a human being at gunpoint. A single thought kept circling my brain (until I

recognized it for what it was). The thought was, “What must he do to give me permission to pull the trigger?” I am shamed by that memory to this very day but the shame wasn’t mine alone. Our people are accepting of violence. I sometimes think it must be written in our DNA and perhaps it is. Violence is what we do. It is not the teaching of our faith, however. We live lives suspended between the voice of the prophets and the voice of our people.

Yes, the murder of Officer Johnson was a horribly evil act. Yes, the death of Brianna Taylor was also evil. There were no drugs in the house. The information upon which the search warrant was issued was stale. Yes, Brianna’s boyfriend who thought the house was being burglarized should not have opened fire. But all these incidents show something about us as a people.

Walter Wink once wrote:

Evil is not just personal but structural and spiritual. It is not simply the result of human actions, but the consequence of huge systems over which no individual has full control. Only by confronting the spirituality of an institution and its physical manifestations can the total structure be transformed. Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure.

“Evil is not just personal but structural and spiritual”.

It's so much easier to imagine that there are good guys and bad guys in the world and all we have to do is to get rid of the bad guys, preferably by shooting them.

It's the American way. Walter Wink disagrees. He maintains, and I agree, that the evil in our world is not simply the actions of the bad guys, but the consequence of huge systems over which no individual has full control, so it's no wonder that preachers go on at such lengths about the “ways of the world” and the “evils of our

time”. The problem isn’t bad people. The problem is the permissions we give ourselves. We need to turn from efforts to rid ourselves of the bad guys and turn to remedying the structural illness which infects this world. A prophet’s calling is to tell the world that change must come, that things are messed up and cannot continue as they are. Such a voice was John the Baptist.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

We need the light if we are to find our way back to God’s plan for His Creation. Abraham Maslow said in 1966, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.” It is the way of humanity to think in terms of the familiar. If we believe that violence is the only tool we

have, then violence becomes the first option to deal with conflict. The job of the prophet is to bring to a community cursed with such short sighted vision the wider vision of our Heavenly Father.

By acknowledging that we and the structures we create are good, bad, and salvageable—all at once—we are freed from the temptation to demonize those who do evil. We can love our enemies or nation or church or school, not blindly, but critically, calling them back time and again to their own highest self-professed ideals and identities.¹

What does this sort of change look like in our world? I suppose we could note that the man who shot Officer Johnson was a druggie, write it off to the evil of drugs and move on. Except the man was out on bond for DUI and had just bought drugs. Why does this man possess a firearm?

I suppose we could say the Louisville officers who

¹ *The Powers That Be (Theology for a New Millennium)* (Walter Wink)

wrote up the sorry excuse for a search warrant affidavit and the judge who signed the warrant were just trying to do their duty against the scourge of drugs and move on. Except....there WERE no drugs. The information was old and stale and had nothing to do with Brianna Taylor. Why was it signed? Why was it served no-knock, the most dangerous way to serve a search warrant?

If God's way had been made straight and our flawed additions neutered, the drug addict who killed Officer Johnson would have been in rehab rather than roaming the streets armed and Brianna Taylor would be saving lives as an EMT. These are the systemic failures that harm real people when huge systems over which no individual has full control are allowed to become sickened and to drift from God's will. Only by pressing for the transformation of this world to more accurately re-

flect God's intention can we hope to see improvement. All of us, every one of us, is good, bad and salvageable, all at once. We can love our enemies or nation or church or school, not blindly, but critically, calling them back time and again to their own highest self-professed ideals and identities. So saith the prophets. So saith us all.

AMEN

Apostle's Creed

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,

born of the Virgin Mary,

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, dead, and buried.

He descended into hell;

The third day he rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;

I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints;

The forgiveness of sin;

The resurrection of the body:

And the life everlasting. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Not too long ago, during the Second World War, the American government imprisoned 120,000 people, two-thirds of whom were US citizens, for the crime of being different. We need to remember this potential for evil which festers within us. It shouldn't have to wait for it to happen to you for it to matter to you.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright 2020 J. Stewart Schneider