

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

THE LUSTER OF SALVATION

Isaiah 62:1-5

Imagine that you have left a friend's home after a fine dinner and are returning home. It is now about 10 o'clock at night and you have to pass by an old barn on the path you have taken. As you approach the barn, you see no light, but you can discern voices. So, you creep closer to the barn in order to hear what is being said. One voice says: "We need to capture her before she can do anymore damage." A second voice chimes in: "And we need to tie her up and get her in the back of the truck, if we want to avoid trouble." The first voice asks, "Where and when would be the best time and place to get her?" You hear a third voice say: "I have watched her for the last year and I know her habits. She always goes to the fork in the evening for a drink." You try to peer into the barn to see who these people are, but it is all dark and they are standing at the other end with their backs to you. As they are about to exit the opposite door, they conclude: "Ok. Tomorrow evening, we'll take the truck down to the main road and park it out of sight. Then we will walk to the fork and wait. When she shows up, we'll jump her, tie her up, put her in the truck and bring her back here." At this point, they are leaving the barn and you scurry on down the path so as not to be discovered. But you are troubled by what you heard and wonder who it is they are going to kidnap and why.

Not knowing the identity of the speakers leaves one to come to all sorts of conclusions about the meaning of a conversation. This certainly did sound like a foul-purposed conspiracy to kidnap a woman. However, in this case, when you investigate it in the light of day, you find out that it was a farmer and his workers who were "plotting" to retrieve their wilily and errant cow as she stopped to drink at the fork in the creek.

Often when we are reading passages from the Old Testament we are faced with the same predicament. The blurring of distinction between God and the prophet is well known in biblical prophecy. Who is speaking in these verses from Isaiah 62? Is it God, or the Prophet, or even the Anointed One? Certainly many of us live as if we have concluded that it was the Prophet and he was speaking about and for his time, some 2800 years ago. It is a good example to us of the faith of the Prophet and the promises of God, but otherwise not relevant to our lives in the United States in the 21st century. Even if it is God speaking, the terms of our relationship with God have radically changes since the time of Isaiah. We no longer think of ourselves as a theocracy, a geographic region or a political entity. And, after all, these words were being spoken as a promise to a people who were in exile and historically they have already been returned to Israel. Again, it is a great passage to aid our faith in God's faithfulness to his promises, but that is about it.

But there is another option, and maybe like the story above, because we cannot see the speaker, we are missing the true message to us in the Church. Perhaps these words are the words of the Anointed One, Jesus the Christ. After all, he himself places himself in the position of the speaker when he begins his ministry by quoting the following words from the 61st chapter of the Prophet Isaiah:

¹⁶When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:14-21)

Since this a continuous speech with our reading today, we are looking at today is a messianic message. It is a message that:

1. Cannot be kept silent;
2. Proclaims the righteousness of the kingdom;
3. Takes God’s message of salvation into the world;
4. Acclaims Christ as King; and
5. Rejoices in God’s blessing of all who turn to him.

Further, if that is the message of Christ, who is the head of the Church, then it is the message of the Church also. We have articulated our call as a church in the words of Lesslie Newbign. As the community of Christ we are to announce and demonstrate the purpose and direction of God through Jesus Christ. If we are to be faithful to our call as the Body of Christ, then the messianic message in today’s passage from Isaiah must be our message also. To paraphrase the Prophet:

¹ For *the kingdom’s* sake I will not keep silent,
and for *Church’s* sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.

² The *peoples* shall see your vindication,
and all the *powers* your glory;
and you *have been* called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD *has given*.

³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

^{5b} ... as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,

so shall your God rejoice over you.

In short, as the Church we have a message that:

1. Cannot be kept silent;
2. Proclaims the righteousness of the kingdom;
3. Takes God's message of salvation into the world;
4. Acclaims Christ as King; and
5. Rejoices in God's blessing of all who turn to him.

This is the essence of the light of salvation that we have been privileged to take into the world. It is the substance of the promise that God made to Abram in the Genesis account when he said:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

As we live in obedience to the call that God has placed upon us and the call to follow our Lord Jesus Christ, we will wear the light of the Lord's salvation and that luster will draw all people to God and bring us absolute joy.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (BCP, p.215)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on January 17, 2010, the Second Sunday after Epiphany.