



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 2 (A)

Relationship

[RCL] Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

The lessons for this second Sunday in Advent are absolutely magnificent in their belief in, understanding of and knowledge about life in the kingdom of God. What do we have here, from the Psalms, through Isaiah, Romans and Matthew? What will it be like?

There will be an abundance of food and understanding and wisdom. The poor and the needy will be rescued and cared for, the oppressed will be made safe and healed, justice and mercy will reign, righteousness and equity will be the order of the day. The Gentiles will be converted. There will be the release of a tremendous power that can actually transform nature. And this power will bring peace, a harmony and order of things that will last forever and will transform our lives forever. It will glorify us in our new existence and burn away the chaff of our former lives. It is the life in the presence of God, the life in God's kingdom, the life in Christ.

What is it like to live in God's kingdom? Why do we take such little advantage of the life God has given us to live? These are questions that rise to the surface as we read the scriptures for today and their stunning declaration of life as it should be. If we believe that Jesus brought this powerful, abundant, and peaceful life to us through his life, death, resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit, then it is we who are remiss for not living it. Yet we tend to put the blame off on God; for some reason, we say, the time for the kingdom of God on earth has yet to arrive. It rarely occurs to us that we, not God, might have got it wrong.

In part we've got it wrong because we have misunderstood Christianity. We have failed to understand that we belong to a religion of relationship, not a religion of law. In a law religion, it is our job to follow the rules, and, if a Messiah is part of the package, it is also our job to wait for that Messiah to come, following the rules in the meantime. In a religion of relationship, in Christianity, our job is to acknowledge our relationship with God and to engage in that relationship as living beings, just as God is a living being. That is our essential commitment as Christians: by becoming Christian, we commit to a relationship with God, with Jesus — not to a rule of law, but to life with another human being who is also God.

Living well with Jesus, thus living well in the kingdom of God, requires what all relationships that flourish require: presence — listening, responding, listening again, responding and so on. It is hard to have a healthy relationship with someone if you never show up or only rarely acknowledge their existence. The relationship does exist no matter what you do, but it is simply an unhealthy or inactive relationship if you fail to participate as active partner. Those of us who have unhealthy and inactive relationships with Jesus have them more out of ignorance than out of ill will; but ignorance is easy enough to overcome, and a new church year is a good time to work on that overcoming.

Let's go back to the promises in the lessons. From them we can learn not only about how life should be in the kingdom, but we can learn how we should be, as we are full members with Jesus in that kingdom. Thus we learn from Isaiah that it is not only Jesus on whom the Spirit of the Lord is to rest, but it is on us also as brothers and sisters of the living God. And on us, as well, come to rest the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and the spirit of counsel and might, and the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. Like Jesus, our delight is to be in the fear of the Lord, and we are not to judge by what we see nor decide by what we hear. Rather, we are to judge with righteousness and decide with equity — those blind and binding garments of the heart.

What a wonderful new year to wake up to, what a glorious kingdom in which to live! Paul's prayer for our new year and for every new day is that the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing — believing that we have a relationship with God that can transform our lives, and by transforming our lives, transform the lives of others.

We are to believe not only in God's promises for us, but in God's ability to implement those promises. It is here that we let our relationship fall into disuse — in the implementation arena of our lives. And it is essential that we allow God the ability to implement God's promises if we are to live into the full power and joy and contentment of relationship with God. If we believe that God can see that we live in harmony with one another, then we must allow God to implement that harmony; if we believe that God can heal us, we must allow God to implement that healing; if we believe that God can forgive the sins we have committed, then we must allow God to forgive those sins; if we believe that God can baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, then we need to allow God to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Thy kingdom come, we pray; but too often we are deaf to God's response: my kingdom is come, rejoice, enjoy, and be glad.

What better new year's resolution to make than to allow God to implement the promises made to us in the scriptures for this Sunday? Bringing this down to the personal, what better new year's resolution for me than for me to allow God to implement in me these promises. To implement them in me, I do have to show up for the relationship, for the work God needs to have happen in me in order for the promises to be implemented in me and in my life. If I am poor and in distress in myself, then I need to show up for God to deliver me from that poverty and distress. If I am oppressed in any way or victimized by violence, then I need to show up for God to redeem me from those circumstances. If God wants to fill me with an abundance of grain from the earth, then I need to show up to be nurtured and fed. If God wants the lamb

and the wolf in me lie down together, then I need to show up for God to make that happen. If I want the child in me to be safe in the midst of poison and paralyzing situations within and without, then I must show up for God to implement God's promise to do so. If God wants me to abound in hope, then I must show up for God to implement that hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Easy? Yes. Fearful? Occasionally, but that's okay. We fear because we have not developed that long-term dialog and relationship with God that allows us to fear less and less and trust more and more. There is part of us that thinks if we show up for relationship with God that nothing is going to happen; and a part that says, "Better to not show up than to have that disaster happen." There's another part of us that thinks that if we show up, we will be struck dead for all the wretchedness we feel or have committed; and yet another part of us that says it's better not to show up than be struck dead. It is here that we need to go with Isaiah again and let the little child lead us. Little children are not afraid of God. Let the little child in you show up for relationship with God and let God take it from there. If the little child is too scared anyway, let the infant show up and be held in God's arms. God is pastoral; God loves this relationship and has every desire for it to be glorious. John the Baptist called sinners to repent, and they were glad to do so. If repenting means turning so our face faces Christ, then we are glad to do so also.

You will grow slowly and transform slowly, or so it will seem. But it will also seem like an instant. Some of it will seem painful as the chaff burns up, the branches get pruned and the wheat gets cut and gathered into the granary. You will meet those who are happy at your new life and those who resent it or think it's wrong. Live it anyway; the trip to the beach is worth the sand in your shoes, and the water of redemption will wash away tears and bring joy to the heart of humankind.

Happy New Year. Amen.

*This sermon was written by **Jane Wolfe** for Advent 2 (A) in 1995.*