

Sermon Proper 28 Year C November 14 2010

Today's biblical texts testify to God's investment in creating a new world. We also see in these passages human beings who keep on struggling and enduring with God's persistent promise and relentless presence. These passages cause us to long for — and call us to work for — a future that is almost beyond our imagination. We must look up and keep on working. It is not over until it is over; the end is not yet here.

Today's passage from Isaiah is from the last section of the Book of Isaiah known as Third Isaiah Chapters 56-66. It is largely agreed that this section of the book was written shortly after the Babylonian exile to a community struggling to reclaim itself as a people returned to Jerusalem. The people returned from Babylon and are just beginning to put their lives, culture, religion and nation back together. The writer of today's passage provides us with a panorama of joy, with the whole universe sharing in God's promise of redemption. We glimpse a picture of idyllic peace; but it is not to be accredited to human ingenuity, nor to human merit. This is all God's doing. God's anticipation of every wish, even before we ask, shows that such happiness is God's creation.

In addition, **Isaiah** proclaims the good news that God is also committed to and involved in bringing about positive change. After a reference to ending and replacing exploitation with a hopeful future Isaiah paints the beautiful picture of the wolf and the lamb feeding together, and the lion eating straw like the ox. This is a future when difference will no longer be a barrier to harmonious existence. Instead of the wolf hoping to eat the lamb and the lamb doing all it can to flee the wolf, the two are in

relation with each other. Perhaps even more astounding is the vision that the lion and the ox will both eat the same thing. In other words, what we see here is more than just a truce or making peace, but a mighty carnivorous predator developing an herbivore appetite and diet, and being nurtured by straw like an ox.

Just as we have to discern between positive and negative traditions, we also must discern when it is actually safe to sit down with "the lion." Trusting in God's salvation and not being afraid does not mean that disempowered and endangered groups can let down their guards and give up their protected space after, say, a single sensitivity training workshop.

It is also important to remember that the changes that Isaiah envisioned were in the terrible context of when God's people were scattered in exile. It gets even more challenging when we see that by the time of Luke — that is, several hundred years after Isaiah — the vision is still far out in the future. In fact, Luke's Jesus is clear that the toppling of a religious edifice does not only not imply the arrival of lasting change, but it may lead to more conflicts and greater catastrophes. The promises of positive change, like those given by Isaiah, are to be trusted in and worked for, but their realization may take a long time or occur only across generations. Faith involves not only a vision, but also patience and endurance.

As shown in Isaiah's example of the lion eating straw like the ox and his warning against exploitation, all of us also need to be challenged to be in solidarity with — to name just a few — immigrant workers, prisoners

and refugees around the world. Justice and peace will not come if we do not see problems with or do anything against injustice.

While **2 Thessalonians** talks about the need to live according to tradition, **Luke** talks about how an edifice or an institution will be toppled, thrown down or thrown away. Nothing stays the same, everything is subject to change. None of Paul's early church's continue to exist. Even in our own diocese I was reminded just last week at a meet of clergy many congregations that once existed in CT no longer exist and many new congregations are here today that weren't here less than 100 years ago. None of us can rest on the laurels of our past, but must re-examine what God is asking of us in the present.

What these passages do point to is the possibility for change, whether it is a tradition, an edifice or an institution. The good news is even religious institutions and traditions are subject to critique and transformation, and we can participate in — and be witnesses to — positive as well as negative changes.

Not only does **2 Thessalonians** correctly advises us to "not be weary in doing what is right," what goes before that verse also suggests that peace and justice always involve "toiling and laboring" with others rather than living apart from or lording over others. Rather than reading this passage as advocating a capitalist-oriented, "no work, no pay" Protestant ethic, perhaps we should bluntly and honestly interpret the passage – suggesting the importance of going beyond empathy for others to actually identifying with others. Just like Isaiah's example of the lion eating straw like an ox, a just and peaceful future will require us to see

both our pains and our privileges, and to become fully identified with those whom we may see as a lesser "other."

Several years ago, President Bill Clinton joined Czech President Vazlev Havel and Ellie Weisel on a panel at NYU. I remember Clinton talking about globalization to which the crowd gave a rousing applause. Then he said something that I believe is true and will continue to be the source of pain for many in our country. He said, that to be part of the global community will exact a price from us. To identify with those from emerging economies or the third world will require us to give up some of our privileges. The applause was not as enthusiastic this time. We will increasingly experience that our over-consuming way of life cannot be sustained in a global world. Moreover, Clinton said we have about 30 years, now 20 years before we are no longer the only super-power in the world....and how we treat the rest of the world in these next years will determine how the world will treat us for generations to come.