

## NOW AND NOT YET

Advent 3, Year B: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
Canticle 15 (Magnificat)  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24  
John 1: 6-8, 19-28

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**Key Passages:** *[H]e has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted... (Is 61:1b)*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*  
(Magnificat, Luke 1:52)

*The one who calls you is faithful. (1 Thes 5:24a)*

Advent is a time of contrasts. We are counseled to be still and wait, but we have so much to do, so many preparations to make, many of them well-intentioned. As good Episcopalians, we know not to sing Christmas carols too soon, but we are also surrounded by messages of hope and good news for the One who is to come. (I have been encouraged by seeing lots of blue lights in neighborhoods this year. Maybe we Episcopalians are having an effect!) The scriptures during Advent emphasize both the coming of Jesus as a baby and also the second coming of Christ, at the end of time, to “judge the world. So there is joy but also fear. And our culture is schizophrenic: we are urged to “buy, buy, buy,” but we also know that overconsumption—and overindulgence in food and drink—wrecks havoc on our lives and relationships, so that the “joy” that we share becomes distorted and lost. How do we sort through these conflicting messages?

Our readings today help us, but they also reinforce the contrasts. During Advent we turn to Old Testament writings for guidance on watching and waiting for the One to come. The gospels also encourage us to look to the prophets. Each begins with the story of John the Baptist, who announces the coming of the Messiah by using the words of the prophets. It is our Jewish heritage that tells us how to look for the coming of the Lord. (This is an important point that is appropriate for another sermon. Let me just say here that it is essential that we as Christians acknowledge that our understanding of God and God’s coming to be with us as Emmanuel is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. We do not have to turn our backs on this heritage in order to embrace the good news of God in Christ.) So what do we see in the prophetic tradition? The messages there have the same sense of contrast, even ambivalence, of trying to understand God’s action in the present and in the future. It’s a matter of “Now and Not Yet.”

Today’s reading from Isaiah comes from the last part of the book. These words are addressed to people in exile, the remnants from Judah who have been conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians. With the fall of Babylon to Persia, there is a sense of expectation, of possibility of being allowed to return to the homeland. The prophet announces encouragement to these exiled and dispirited people, with the promise of God’s continuing covenant with the people. The prophet also personally identifies with a hopeful message: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed...” It is interesting to notice that the message goes back and forth between the present and the future. Even the tenses

of the verbs vary: the spirit *is* here, liberty *is* proclaimed, there *is* comfort for those who mourn...AND the people *will* build up the ancient ruins, God *will* give them recompense, all people *will* see the blessing of God... The prophet says that God's Spirit is active now and that this spirit promises good things for the future. The message of hope is for present circumstances as well as for the future. In the midst of the deprivation of exile the prophet announces the presence and the promise of God.

The contrast is even greater when we look at the text of today's Canticle. The song of Mary comes from the gospel of Luke, the words of Mary as she rejoices in the news that she is to bear the child Emmanuel, God-with-us. Mary says that future generations will call her blessed in this birth, but her words about God's actions refer to the past continuing into the present: "God has shown the strength of his arm; God has scattered the proud and lifted up the lowly." In the midst of the slavery of the Jewish people under Roman rule, Mary proclaims God's care for the poor and judgment of the proud and powerful. It's a message of reversal of "normal" values, and God is already bringing this about.

Why am I making such a big deal of this contrast? Why does "Now and Not Yet" matter? I think Advent presents us with a fundamental truth of our faith. It's the faith we affirm in many of our Eucharistic prayers: "Christ has come. Christ will come again." Our faith in Christ, our understanding of his significance is a belief in the Now and in the Not Yet. "Now and not yet" impels us to take seriously the sense that all is not right, while simultaneously trusting in God's promise of the power of love. The ambivalence is essential. It accords with our natural response to the good news of God's action in the world: the power of Love is loose in the world, but the world remains a dangerous and difficult place. We see God at work in the sacrificial love of Jesus and we also see the continuing violence and greed that obliterate God's image and spoil God's creation. "Now and not yet" affirms that God has created a universe which "bends toward justice," while we acknowledge the continuing need for repentance and new life because of sin and evil in the world. The final outcome is not in doubt—God will triumph—and we are called to live with hope in our present circumstances as God continues to bring about a world set right in peace and justice.

I don't know about you, but these days I identify with the need of those exiled people back then to hear good news. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we are in a type of exile, both as a nation and as a church. In our church, especially the Episcopal Church, we continue to be discouraged by dwindling membership numbers, and some parishes and diocese continue to be torn by controversy. We search for the best way to be true to the Gospel and to continue our relationships with other parts of the Anglican Communion. Regardless of how we turn, it seems there is hurt, misunderstanding and division.

The economy in our nation continues in turmoil. So many people are unemployed, or just barely making it by cobbling together part-time work. Businesses face uncertainty because of falling demand. Governments are laying off all sorts of workers, and young people come out of college with few job prospects. Houses have plunged in value, and retirement savings no longer provide an assured future. Politically we seem unable to work towards solutions to our economic woes, contenting ourselves with polarization, blame, gridlock, and scapegoats. Terrorism continues unabated, and seemingly endless war casts a pall over the nation. And climate change is

bringing terrible weather events and rising sea levels that threaten many vulnerable lands and peoples.

I am not trying to paint too bleak a picture. I am trying to draw a parallel with the Biblical hearers of the Advent message, so that we can see both the promise and the hope with new eyes. The prophecies and promises of both old and new testaments affirm the dilemmas we face. In the midst of difficulties and sorrows, we hear the message that God is acting to reconcile us, and that this action is dynamic, it continues all around us. We will surely not see the ultimate restoration of God's creation in our lifetimes. We will see, as have all our faithful forebears, signs of God's love and care for us, and God's trustworthiness in leading us into new life.

Our Advent Scriptures give us this assurance. And they also help us discover clues for our watching and acting. We read that God's power is set loose to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry, to comfort those who mourn, to rebuild ruined cities, to confound the powerful, to render justice to the robbers. So I think the message to us as we hear these passages is two-fold.

First, it acknowledges our sense that not all is right. It gives us permission to grieve both personally and nationally for the effects of greed, violence, disease, and evil all around us. It spurs us to action by letting us know that change is needed. And, second, it gives us pictures of God's actions—already happening-- and urges us to join God in that work. We are assured that  
    wherever comfort overcomes sorrow,  
    wherever the hungry are fed,  
    wherever those who abuse power are brought down  
    —there God is at work.

And we can turn our hearts—and our hands—towards those places of healing and rebuilding. Whether it's

    buying a wreath made by farmers in NC in order to provide schooling for children in Dominican Republic,  
    or praying for the summit on climate change in Durban,  
    or sitting with a grieving friend,  
    or urging our elected leaders to find reasonable solutions to our economic problems,  
    or not allowing theological disputes to divide our hearts and churches  
—through actions small and large, we find ways to look for God's coming into the world. This is the “now and the not yet” of Advent—the joyful hope of a baby born in a manger and the continuing work of all of us who want to follow that Child of God into God's amazing future.