

Advent 1 – “The Prophet Prepares”
Delivered Sunday, November 27, 2011
By Rev. Jill Duffield, associate pastor
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Isaiah 11:1-9

In a fit of Christian education zeal I decided that it would be a good idea to arrange to take the confirmation class of my little rural southern church to worship at a Jewish temple. Given that their idea of diversity was going to school with independent, primitive and free will Baptists, I thought it would be helpful for them to experience real live Jewish people since we'd been talking about Jesus, his disciples and the early church in the context of Judaism. My group was eager to go and the trip even had an edge of anxious mystery attached to it. Later I learned that this may have been because one of the more mischievous in the group had told the boys that circumcision was required for entry and they'd be asked to provide proof. Regardless, everyone dutifully showed up.

Worship was both familiar and foreign, the space not unlike our chancel and pews, but the Hebrew and the procession with the scroll not akin to anything they had ever experienced. Afterward, the rabbi met with us to explain both the service and some basic tenets of Judaism. The confirmands then had the opportunity to ask questions. I was impressed both with the honesty of their questions and the rabbi's answers. One of our kids asked, “Why don't Jewish people believe that Jesus is the Messiah?” The rabbi responded by first expressing admiration for Jesus and then said, “Well, because scripture says that when the messiah comes there will be justice and peace. Wars will cease and people will not exploit or oppress other people. It is easy to see that that did not happen with the coming of Jesus. It still hasn't happened so we believe that the messiah is yet to come.” A few more questions followed and soon we were headed to lunch.

Not long after that one of my confirmands was talking with me. He'd arrived a little early and was helping me get ready for class. He said, “You know our visit to the temple?” “Yes,” I said. “Well, I've been thinking about it and well, first of all, I really do believe Jesus is the Messiah, I really do. I believe in Jesus.” I felt like he was protecting my feelings, assuring me I was not failing at my job. He went on, “But you have to admit, that rabbi made a good point about why they don't believe Jesus is the Messiah.” I was taken off guard and mumble what was, I'm sure, a poor response. Because, let's be honest, it is a good point. It is hard to argue with it, as a matter of fact. Reading from Isaiah this morning begs the question, “When?” When will justice and righteousness prevail? When will the wolf and the lamb lie down together? When will little children play a midst poisonous snakes with impunity? When will the hurting and destruction stop and the knowledge of the Lord pour over God's people and overflow into all creation? If the one who possesses wisdom and might and fells the wicked with a mere breath has come then why hasn't suffering ceased? Why aren't all fed and housed and clothed and cared for? Yes, the rabbi made a good point, indeed. Has a root sprung from the stump of Jesse or does it remain dormant? Echoing the words of John the Baptist from prison to Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another??” What would you have said to that young man who really believes in Jesus but recognizes the incongruity between Isaiah's prophecy and our present reality?

If I had the chance to do it over I think I would start with these words from Isaiah. I might say hear these words, but don't hear them as pie in the sky, by and by, wouldn't that be great if, words, hear them as unwavering, inevitable, already happening, the promise of God fulfilled and being fulfilled as we live and breathe words. Change the verb tenses around

to reflect God's time and not our own. He **does not** judge with his eyes or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he **judges** the poor, and **decides** with equity for the meek of the earth. Hear them not only as prophecy but as promise. Hear them that way because that is what they are and with the coming of Jesus, his life, death, resurrection and certain return, the promise has been and is being fulfilled. This certainty gives us the hope and courage to enter those places where brokenness is rampant and oppression still rules and violence thinks it has the last word. I would say let me tell you a story about that kind of courage and hope. Here's what living that promise looks like.

In 1977 Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu spoke in front of 15,000 people at the funeral of murdered black-conscious leader Steve Biko and declared that white rule was finished. Listen to what he said, "The powers of injustice, of oppression, of exploitation, have done their worst, and they have lost. They have lost because they are immoral and wrong, and our God...is a God of justice and liberation and goodness. Our cause...must triumph because it is moral and right and just." He made this declaration sixteen years before apartheid ended. Upon his retirement last year the 79 year old said, "That's the chief lesson I have learned. The texture of our universe is one where there is no question at all but that good and laughter and justice will prevail." He goes on to say, "God is not even handed. God is biased, horribly biased in favor of the weak. The minute an injustice is perpetrated, God is going to be on the side of the one who is being clobbered." The author of an article in Time magazine writes, "Tutu was not the only church leader who opposed apartheid. What marked him out was an unearthly confidence...Tutu's secret, then, is no secret at all. It is faith. Good and laughter and Justice will prevail. 'In the end,' says Tutu, 'the perpetrators of injustice or oppression, the ones who strut the stage of the world often seemingly unbeatable---there is no doubt at all that they will bite the dust.' The thought still delights him. 'Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!' he roars. 'Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!'" (Time, October 11, 2010)

The prophets words are not maybe, if, perhaps. They are certain, inevitable, unwavering. They are God's PROMISE. Therefore we can live with an unearthly confidence knowing that good and laughter and justice will prevail and we are invited by God and commanded by Jesus to participate in its present and coming reality.

If I had another chance to respond to that young confirmand's observation I think I'd start with the vision of Isaiah and then I might remember Jesus' response to John's pleading question from prison. Jesus sends those who've come to him on John's behalf with the following commission: "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Jesus instructs them to give testimony. Tell John what YOU see and hear. If I had a second chance I would remember the bold promises of the prophets and start big with the certain, victorious ending, and then I'd get small and be brave enough to be personal. I'd give my testimony. I'd want to share with him what I've experienced of Jesus. I'd be honest, first of all, and say, that there is much horribly wrong with the world and I don't understand why bad things happen and if I were God I think I might do things differently. I'd want to be really honest and say I don't know why your best friend's mom is buried behind the church and your father struggles with addiction. I'd say there's much that isn't right in my own life and I too often don't practice what I preach but then I'd want to say this: God is here, Emmanuel, God with us, is here and working for good, for justice, for peace. And sometimes, when I'm not too distracted or self-obsessed or just plain oblivious, I see Jesus with us and at work. It isn't always grand, often it is just a glimpse but I know it as well as I know you are here in front of me. I see the eyes of the blind open when neighbors who fought tooth and nail to keep a soup kitchen from coming to a local church ended up serving there every week. I see the possibility of lepers being cleansed when the motherly

volunteer at the Salvation Army sits down to talk with the young homeless man who has come to eat so high he can barely walk to his seat. I see wolf and the lamb curl up together when parents that have been ravaged by anger and estrangement find a way to work together for the sake of their hurting children. I have been covered with the knowledge of the Lord when church people have prayed for me, forgiven me, cared for me, over and over and over again.

Yes, the Rabbi has a good point, a very good point, not all is right with the world, far from it, but look closely at all of the hurt and destruction and you will see that Jesus is right there in the middle of it, horribly biased on the side of the ones getting clobbered, bringing the reign of God near, binding up the broken hearted, calling in the outcasts, resurrecting those the world has left for dead and commissioning us to go and tell those locked up and despairing in prison, that Jesus is here and coming to set the captives free. Of this there is no doubt, so go and live in unearthly confidence proclaiming the promise and telling what you hear and see. They will not hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain for the earth will be, and with the coming of Jesus Christ is, full of the knowledge of the Lord.