Slouching Towards Bethlehem

Isaiah 2:1 - 5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw about Judah and Jerusalem.

2 In the days to come
   the mountain of the House of God
Will stand firm above the mountains,
   and tower above the hills;
and all the nations
shall gaze upon it with joy.
3   Many peoples will go and say,
“Come, let us go up to the Divine Mount,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that God may teach us Divine Ways
   and that we may walk on Divine Paths.”
For instructions will come forth from Zion,
   Divine Words will come forth from Jerusalem.
4 God will judge between the nations,
   and arbitrate for the many peoples;
And they will beat their swords into plowshares,
   and their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation will not take up the sword against nation,
   They will never again know war.

5 O, House of Jacob, Come, Let us Walk in such Divine Light.

For those of you who know my ardent relationship with the Hebrew Bible, it is no surprise that I chose the prophet Isaiah’s passage as this morning’s primary text. And for those of you who know my love for the belles-lettres, it is certainly no shock that my sermon seems to reference both William Butler Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming,” and Joan Didion’s seminal collection of essays which shares the same title as this homily. Yet, by now, good people of Pullen know to anticipate the unexpected when I am in the pulpit (or anywhere). Although I am a reader of both Didion and Yeats, my inspiration comes from an episode of Angel, the television series from the late 1990s about a vampire with a restored soul. In this particular plot, a rather gifted seer is asked to look into the future of one of his allies who has temporarily lost
her memory. The glimpse into the future is so bleak that the seer runs from the room mid-sentence leaving his colleagues aghast. When the cast of do-gooders follows to comfort their fellow compatriot, they find him disoriented and overwhelmed, yet, they continue to press for details about the unspeakable vision. Distraught and unable to thread words together that truly capture the unknowable apocalypse, the seer lifts his head and utters, “Do the words Slouching Towards Bethlehem ring a bell?”

In a rhetorical question, the seer erases the lines between the known and the unknowable substituting emotion, mood, and allusion to Yeats and Didion in place of overly simple declarations. In fact, the vision of the future is so disturbing that the only means to order the chaos is to be a bard who weaves an ancient literary tradition, albeit too old and familiar, with a poem that is yet to be written. Yeat’s “rough beast”\(^1\) rumbles in Didion’s incompatible “world of disorder”\(^2\) only to create an equation without a discernible finality. Throughout the episode, viewers begin to see that those striving for the good are limited in their personal agency while simultaneously being held captive by pernicious principalities and powers. A moment of silence follows the question, and its deafening grip paints a world that is complex; it is a world where those working for justice, regardless of their talents, feel dismay.

Such a question seems to be lingering around us, and our own responsive silence has had little time to hang in the air due to a cacophony of pronouncements from Washington, D.C. Daily, sources report of another political cabinet appointment of people seemingly void of credentials, critical thought, and moral compass. Their qualifications show little experience in advocating for human rights but demonstrate notable experiences in racist remarks, domestic


violence, and sexist attitudes. More incomprehensible is the action surmounting in the public square where swastikas are being carved into church doors,\textsuperscript{3} racial slurs are being spray painted on community centers,\textsuperscript{4} and anti-immigrant messages are being plastered on homes.\textsuperscript{5} The Southern Poverty Law Center reports 701 hateful incidents of harassment the week following the election.\textsuperscript{6} On Monday, a video of a White Nationalist gathering in Washington, D.C., was released capturing people with extended arms chanting, “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!” The racially-fueled hatred of 2016 parallels the racially-fueled hatred of 1930’s Nazi Germany. In an interview with the New York Times, the President-elect claimed he had little knowledge of such incidents and denied any correlation between such events and his own incendiary remarks over the past eighteen months. Many major news outlets, pliant in action, reported the interview heavily peppered with “I don’t know” as a rejection of extremism.\textsuperscript{7} Seemingly unaware, neglectful, and idle, the disasters are loosed, and so, this morning I rightly ask, “Do the words Slouching Towards Bethlehem ring a bell?”

Although our current political apocalypse seems new and dire causing many of us to lower our heads and whisper our prayers, it is not. “Rough beasts” have fueled history and

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have occupied a significant portion of our sacred scripture. The geopolitical background of this morning’s text from Isaiah comes from one of the most tumultuous epochs in the ancient Near East. Kingdom after kingdom assaulted the tiny plot of Hebrews, leaving her and her people vulnerable to the growing Assyrian empire. Known for imperial expansion, the Assyrians exacted several policies to expand their land mass and wealth accumulation. The empire convened the appointment of native puppet-rulers in satellite states; the exaction of tribute and taxation from agriculture and religious life; the engagement of warfare that robbed the land of natural resources and laid waste to local inhabitants; and the desecration of temples and forced cultic practice that positioned the Assyrian king as the pinnacle of the divine pantheon. The most devastating practice was forced migration where the surviving population was taken to the center of the empire to work for the financial gains of Assyrian citizens. Distraught and dislocated, the Hebrews had seen the cedars of Lebanon pillaged, Yahweh subjugated and the temple vandalized, the Promised Land scorched, their cultural heritage erased, and the prospects of their future annihilated.

Yet, despite the calamity and catastrophe, Isaiah envisions a landscape beyond a current reality where Divine Justice and Peace are the centrifugal forces spreading out to the known world. Isaiah’s conception notes his prophetic way of seeing truth in which the economy of the empire is replaced with the economy of God. This economy is not dependent on a glorious future built by kings but rather it is an ever-becoming present to anyone willing to see God’s common dream. Isaiah’s vision has no room for the slouching that would support only the elite.

but calls for a new posture where the homeless are housed, the naked are clothed, the prisoners are treated as humans, the widows and children are afforded community, and the burdens of injustices are broken.9

The posture mentioned by Isaiah is one that is firm and is akin to the mountain, the geographical feature that is stable and certain. In a climate that makes exacerbated claims, convictions will need to move beyond opinions and words that simply name the plagues of our society as perverse nationalism, rabid xenophobia, alarming sexism, grave transphobia, and horrific racism. Our beliefs are called to be embodied and clothed with flesh and spirit. For some of us our lived faith will be formed in poems, dance, equations, or paintings. For others our lived faith will be on the front lawns of state houses and governor’s mansion while others will be at tables providing wise counsel. Although our beliefs will take myriad forms, let us be cautious not to confuse our stability with stasis. There will be time for quiet meditation and reflection. That is not equated with silence. Our individual talents, voices, and bodies will be needed to truly envision the work of God.

In spite of the fact that individuals are required, Isaiah’s posture is a stance that gazes beyond itself onto a greater entity. Our current cultural commodity is the individual, that one person who either as the protagonist or the underdog overshadows the ensemble. On the playing field, on the television, in the halls of government, the community is continually subjugated to the most admirable of citizens, “the rugged individual.” Sadly, to be a good citizen you no longer have to be a good person. Writers sensitive to the growing selfishness in

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9 Isaiah 58: 5-14.
our society have bemoaned the “me generation”\textsuperscript{10} and lamented The Fall of the Public Man.\textsuperscript{11}

Psychologist Martin Seligman recently wrote:

In the past quarter-century, events occurred that so weakened our commitment to larger entities as to leave us almost naked before the ordinary assaults of life. Where can one now turn for identity and purpose? When we need spiritual furniture, we look around and see that all the comfortable leather sofas and stuffed chairs have been removed and all that’s left to sit on is a small, frail folding chair: the self.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, the image of the lone person reliant only on their sole existence, focused on their sole needs, and resigned to their own whims heralds our current age.

Isaiah’s posture shatters the sole solipsist, and in its place fixes our collective gaze on Mount Zion. Exceeding both geographical and political boundaries, Zion is the symbol of a cosmic order not reliant on kingdoms but dependent upon humanity. Zion gives us insight into a different reality and is not contingent on a one-to-one relationship, but open to multivalent ideas.\textsuperscript{13} Our Zion is lived when we provide housing for the 2,736 homeless students attending school in Wake County;\textsuperscript{14} Zion is created when living wages are provided for all those who labor and not just those who are full-time municipal employees;\textsuperscript{15} Zion is affirmed when women are provided equal pay and not openly harassed and assaulted in the media;\textsuperscript{16} and Zion

\textsuperscript{11} Richard Sennett, The Fall of the Public Man (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).
\textsuperscript{12} Martin E.P. Seligmann, Learned Optimism (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
\textsuperscript{13} Joy Hooker, “Zion as Theological Symbol in Isaiah: Implications for Judah, the Nations, and the Empire,” in Isaiah and the Empire Context, 111-112.
is lived when we have a society where black women and men are not two and half times more likely to be killed by a highly militarized police force.\textsuperscript{17}

The systemic plagues of our culture are surely addressed in the realization of Zion, but they are not done so without the care and comfort of people. Isaiah’s posture is not a disregard for the pain and suffering of people; it is a broad spectrum of care. Our stance maybe fixed on a common good, but it is not without stooping downwards to offer our hands to those who have fallen, or in face-to-face interaction where kindness is synonymous with justice making. In the words of the poet Maya Angelou, “Here, on the pulse of this new day, You may have the grace to look up and out, And into your sister's eyes, into Your brother's face.”\textsuperscript{18} Zion does not promote a strident division of compassion and social action, but insists on Holy Conjunctions that move our bodies in, around, beside, and amongst each other in postures of healing and helping.

Although this posture is firm in its position and looking towards an aspirational common wealth, it is not without a true humility. Beating swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks requires us to learn new ideas to bring forth the Commonwealth of God. This posture requires us to admit that we do not have all the answers, and that some of the answers we do have will need to be granted attention. A reexamination of our own whiteness and class will require us to use these privileges in new ways that demolish exceptionalism while uplifting equality. We will need to do such until our privilege fades into kinship and our polarity.


becomes mutuality. Our tools will need to enhance our care taking and community building and not be instruments to reinforce our divisions and inequities.

Instead, Isaiah calls us to a posture that is open and embracing. The nations flowing to Mount Zion are not the returning diasporic Hebrews but the empires that once represented strife and discourse. Their numbers are legion: Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Arameans, Canaanites, Edomites, Philistines, and countless smaller groups that were once depicted as enemies are now together in unity. We at Pullen are descendants from these Hebrews who were looking to make God’s vision broader and more inclusive. This is evidenced in our welcome statement where we name:

- The Certain and the Doubtful;
- The Excluded and the Included;
- Rich, Poor and In Between;
- Divorced, Partnered, Single and Widowed;
- Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Hindu, Jewish or Nothing;
- Heterosexual, Homosexual and Transgender;
- Black, White, Asian, Latino;
- Citizens and Guests.19

Isaiah’s posture calls for us to go beyond a mere welcome to enfold each other in our embrace. Together, we should passionately and willingly hold the rights and humanities of others as equal and essential to our own. This posture calls us to step across boundaries where those who identify as male are concerned about the full humanity of those who identify as female; those who are white are devoted to the endeavor of those who are black; those who are straight are committed to those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and non-gender identified; those who are citizens are dedicated to those who are immigrants; and those who have means work for the benefit of those who have little. This posture is not meant to erase the identity of anyone who was created in the Holy image but it strives to acknowledge that our liberation is

cohesively bound in togetherness. This posture is a holy solidarity where the Divine Act is the work of human hands, all human hands.

Isaiah, like the seer in Angel, was gifted in his ability of prophetic vision. Yet, unlike our modern fictional character, when faced with the looming apocalypse, Isaiah performs a tenacious and scandalous act: He hopes. Hope is part of our justice making and our compassion giving and our walking in unity with the Divine. It should not be confused with a simplistic optimism that declares “everything is going to be okay” or “hey, we’ve got each other.” That is naive and arrogant. Hope is neither a soft cushion for no nor a time delaying tactic to avoid commitment that is expectant with, “I hope to make it to the gym” or “I hope to give you a donation.” That is dishonest and selfish. Hope is not given solely to the winner of political elections or enforced by the principalities and powers. That is propaganda. "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope." Hope is a Divine Gift that stands as a contradiction and resistance to a harsh current reality.

Advent is a dramatic liturgical season that depicts the struggle between Divine Light and the powers of darkness, desperate to overcome each other. In the moments of desperation, hope is not the excuse of the feeble but the call of the faithful. Isaiah envisions a new dream for the grasping and a new story for the telling. In our own story, I imagine Isaiah would support our glimpses upon Bethlehem because in its insignificance great meaning is found. Bethlehem births a hope that is not robed in the majesty of empire surrounded by the cacophony of kings, but wrapped in cloth remnants sheltered in the hush of a refugee family. Isaiah calls us to look on this vision with postures that do not allow slouching. This type of radical hope may infest our Advent with notions of Epiphany and Pentecost as we embrace new ideas and speak in new

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tongues making our hope audacious, tenacious, and bold. Surely, this is what Abraham meant when he “hoped against hope.” Looking out into the darkness, the light whispers, “Yes, there is a God of hope.” I believe, do you?