

## The New Public

---

There is a tendency within Christianity to separate spiritual things—move them away from day-to-day living—to make matters of faith private: Jesus is my personal savior.

Well, that perspective doesn't come from Scripture. It's true that God is personal—faith is personal; but it's not private. All four texts from today's Lectionary portray hope as visible, public, shared yearning. What God has promised is a deep, fundamental change in public and social relationships. When life is submitted to God's purpose and will, it changes the way we see people and the way we want people to be treated—both in private relationships and in public policy.

The roots of Advent found in Isaiah, for example, are cast in royal terms. Isaiah marks the king as one whose work is to bring justice to the weak; to equalize by a powerful intervention a social situation of enormous inequity.

In today's text, Isaiah, describes the political situation in Jerusalem as a "stump;" specifically, the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David, the king whose reign had become the standard for Israel's vision of themselves. But the tree is cut down. All that's left of David is a stump.

David's dynasty has been humiliated by the Assyrians. The northern kingdom already has fallen—or soon will fall; and the image of a "stump" conveys Israel's situation of despair and resignation.

But now comes a new King. You know how we are when a new President is elected—especially if he's from our party: "Now things will be better!" The new king makes a new world possible—a "New Public" characterized by justice and equity and peace.

You see, for Isaiah, that new public is not just a private, pious expression of hope that will be fulfilled automatically or by osmosis—just because there's a new king. The newness Isaiah envisions is public is political; but it's not partisan. And it's disruptive. It disrupts everything that's old and destructive, and demands a decision that is both daring and costly: daring because we won't know how to act in a genuinely just community; costly because we must put at risk those old, inequitable patterns of life that have become comfortable and from which we have benefitted.

For Isaiah, the difference between those life patterns is the Spirit of the Lord that will rest upon this new king—this "shoot from the stump of Jesse."

The Spirit... The same word appears in Genesis when the formless void prior to creation is described: "the 'wind' from God swept over the face of the waters." The same word is used again when God breathes into man the "breath" of life.

That same life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power

and wind rests upon the "shoot from the stump of Jessie" and creates utter newness. This "Spirit/wind/breath of God" is mysterious, irresistible, and beyond human control, management or predictability. It brings new possibility; it forecloses all futures. The matter is urgent, because some still cling to the status quo—some who believe the hopeless stump can defy the wind and keep Jerusalem as it is because they benefit from the way things are.

But Isaiah says otherwise: The spirit will prevail. And the stump is not mentioned again, because the Spirit will rest upon that little "shoot" will transform him. The Spirit will lead the king in advocating for good, fair, and equitable judgment. The wind that will blow over the new governance is marked by wisdom, understanding, and power. This is what Isaiah prophesied:

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NRSV)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
<sup>2</sup> The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
<sup>3</sup> His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
<sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.  
<sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
<sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
<sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
<sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.

Return of the Remnant of Israel and Judah

<sup>10</sup> On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

\* \* \*

Isaiah and the other texts in today's Lectionary; indeed, the Bible in general, has a distinctive notion of righteousness and equity. This equity is a political, interventionist, active justice, which is entrusted to the "shoot" from the "stump of Jessie"—a form of justice that never quite became reality in the history of Israel or, indeed, in the history of humanity to this day; but which reflects the will of God, and is fulfilled in the life of Jesus. And it is a justice to which God calls all who would claim to follow Jesus.

The upshot is a restored, reconciled creation in which brutality is tamed and deathliness is overcome. The oldest of enemies—wolf/lamb, leopard/kid, calf/lion, cow/bear, lion/ox—are made friends. It seems impossible to the human mind; but the wind has blown, the spirit has rested. Newness is come.

Three times a child is mentioned. "A little child shall lead them." "The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den." This "little child" signals the birth of a new innocence in which trust, gentleness, and friendship are possible and appropriate. The world will be ordered so that the fragile and vulnerable can have their say and live their lives.

Now, how do we get from Israel, 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, to here and now. Israel was a theocracy, in which faith and the governance were intertwined. America is a democratic republic with the ties intentionally cut between faith and government. History—including the history of ancient Israel and every instance since—demonstrates conclusively the destructive results when faith controls government and/or government controls faith.

The traditional way of resolving the conundrum has been to say that Isaiah, and the Psalmist were talking about the Messiah, and Jesus and the Gospels and Paul were all talking about personal spirituality—not political or social concerns. It is true that Jesus measured up to the description of this "shoot from the stump of Jessie." But, why does spirituality have to be separated from political and social involvement? The vision shared by Isaiah and virtually all the prophets—the vision lived by Jesus of Nazareth is deeply political and social.

Is it not spiritual to advocate—as Jesus did—for justice and peace? Is it not spiritual to stand—as Jesus did—with the poor and the vulnerable and the alien in our midst? Is it not spiritual to confront corrupt power with truth—as Jesus did?

It all comes back to this: the new possibilities depend on the wind. That wind is blowing. Advent is our time to decide to trust the new wind that blows against the hopeless stump of everything that has failed; and to move with that Spirit into its new public reality, where "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."