

“Future-Tense Faith”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Thanksgiving Sunday
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 19, 2017

Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

One of my friends, Scott Spence, is also the pastor of a UCC church. He sent a message this week asking how I was handling this text, since both our churches use this schedule of readings called the Narrative Lectionary. We’ve preached on Isaiah, chapter 9, but it’s usually in a different context. It’s usually read alongside another story, famous for its shepherds, stable, manger and baby. Scott asked what I was thinking about preaching this week because, he said, “I just keep wanting to preach a Christmas Eve sermon.”

Scott might be a month ahead on the calendar, but it’s easy to understand the connection to Christmas. This is the very text set to glorious music in Handel’s “Messiah”, used as foreshadowing for Jesus’ birth and sung so frequently in the holiday season. But Scott’s getting ahead of himself is a more profound impulse also. There is a deep current of forward movement, of anticipation, in the Christian faith. We are always looking ahead to the fulfilment of God’s promises. Christianity looks around at the world as it is and proclaims that there is more than meets the eye. Not this only, or this, or this, but *that* off in the future, envisioned with the eyes of faith and held in the heart. It’s the sense of ultimate hope depicted at the end of the Bible, in those words of Revelation promise so often read at funerals: “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” The Christian faith is lived with future tense.

We get that future faith from our Hebrew ancestors, including the prophet Isaiah. He too looked around at the world of his day and looked ahead to something else. The two Hebrew kingdoms of his day, split by civil war, would not be divided forever. The foreign adversaries with boots of war and garments soaked in blood would not prevail forever. Listen to the future tense with which Isaiah prophesied here: “there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.” God “will make glorious” the lands of Palestine. Isaiah can see the light of tomorrow dawning though the times he lived in were bleak as midnight.

Except for this. If we start studying the grammar of Isaiah’s prophecy, we’ll recognize that future, present and past tense get all mixed up. The future is being realized even *now*, and has been realized already! So Isaiah says, “the people who walked in darkness *have seen* a great light”; “on them light *has shined*”. He says to God: “You *have multiplied* the nation, you *have increased* its joy.” “You *have broken*” the yoke of burden, the bar across shoulders, the rod of the oppressor. Isaiah recognizes God’s action in the past, raising up a savior—in this case likely a military ruler, though Christians connect the prophecy to Jesus. “A child has been born for us, a son given to us.” But the future fulfilment is not yet realized: “his

authority *shall* grow continually, and *there shall be* endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He *will establish and uphold it* with justice and with righteousness.”

Isaiah shows us what is sometimes called “the now and the not yet” of Christian faith. God is present and active right here and **now**, but the full realization of God’s promise is **not yet** at hand. We hold with one hand “in the sweet by and by when I die”, and in the other hand “down on the ground while I’m still around”! The faith that there is more to come carries us through seasons of heartsickness when all seems in trouble. Yet the promise of God’s manifesting right here and now can keep us from being “so heavenly minded that we’re of no earthly use”. “Now” and “not yet”—held in faithful balance with one another.

This season in the church’s life feels full of such promise and realization. With Thanksgiving Sunday and all the gratitude that we extend this week, we number the blessings of the past year: abundance in capital campaign generosity, growth in worship, Spirit and members, those in need of care held with perpetual love and prayer. Over coffee and conversation each week in Bible study and at fellowship time, we name the brokenness of the world as it is, yet also point with gladness to what hopes are being born anew in it. Our confirmation youth—on an urban retreat this weekend—have experienced firsthand how hard it is to live in poverty in Minneapolis, yet also volunteered to make it better, serving food and cleaning at a homeless shelter yesterday. The Divine Design Task Force has been meeting with possible architects this week, interviewing candidates to help us remake our entrance and narthex to be more welcoming and serviceable. We are counting the blessings of the past and acknowledging limits of the present, while building with our pledges and hopes for the future. We are practicing both the “now” and the “not yet” of our faith.

Listen in closing to these words of wisdom in a hymn by Natalie Sleeth, which sees the future in the present moment.

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

Faith that God holds the future is what gives us hope in the present moment, while knowledge that sees God among us even now spurs our participation to join God in making the best possible tomorrow. This is the faith that we inherit from Isaiah, Jesus and all our ancestors. This is the faith that we live by, pulling us into tomorrow. This is the faith by which we share every good thing. This is the faith that helps us trust the promise of Christmas Eve, even in the days before Thanksgiving. For such faith, we give all thanks to God. Amen.