

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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December 10, 2017 – Second Sunday of Advent

The Conception of Justice

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” – Luke 1:5-25

Life is unfair, have you noticed that? I got a phone call the other day from a fellow who lost his rent money. His landlord requires cash, and on the way home from the bank, the envelope with the cash in it went missing. He was desperate for help, because he was poor. If you are poor, you have no safety net; your budget and your life leave no wiggle room. Life is already hard, and then if something goes wrong, if you get robbed, or get sick or something breaks, you are in trouble, deep trouble. If any little thing goes wrong, it can lead to a cascade of other problems: a shortage of cash can lead to a housing problem, a food problem, a health problem, a relationship problem, an employment problem, a school problem. And any of those things can lead to yet more problems. Things fall apart. And you know what people say when that happens? We say, “It is not fair!” And we are right. The world is not a fair place.

Even if your life is pretty good, you know this world is often not fair. It isn't just poverty. Some people get more hardship than anyone deserves, while others have all the luck. If your skin is brown, or your address is on the wrong side of the tracks, or you have a genetic disposition to some problem or another, or you are a woman or gay or transgendered or you have a disability, life is just harder. The world is not fair, but we believe in a God who is fair. And there is a tension between those two realities. If God is fair, how can the world be so unfair? If the world is unfair, how can its creator be fair?

There are no atheists in foxholes, the old saying goes, but there are also few atheists in emergency wards or in slums. In the midst of poverty and oppression and rampant, entrenched injustice, people hope. They hope that the economic and political systems are not the greatest powers in the world. They hope that there is a power of justice and compassion at work in the world. They hope for a loving and just God. They hope for a day when God's justice will triumph over injustice, a day when God's peace will win out over violence, a day when God's abundance will overturn poverty, a day when God's healing will transform suffering. That is why at the time of Jesus' birth, people were longing for a saviour. They were hoping for something and someone who would bring about, in some small way, the birth of a new world, a world of justice.

According to the story, the promise comes first to a couple who were barren, unable to conceive. To be barren means the future is closed; there is nothing to look forward to. When the future is closed, whether it is for an elderly childless couple in ancient Judea, or for children growing up with little money and less hope, or for grieving parents, or those facing fearsome medical problems, or for you, here today, struggling with your own struggles, life seems barren, like a desert where nothing grows.

But in barren situations, angels appear, bringing good news. Is that because only those who are barren are open to God's visitation, or because God hears their cries and sends to them especially some sign of hope and care? We do not know. But we do know that God has a surprising way of touching people, even at those times when they think God is most distant.

And so it happens that this barren couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had been unable to conceive, suddenly in their old age, receive a messenger from God. A child will be born, a child who will turn the people caught in injustice back to the ways of a just God.

This story suggests that God acts in the world, not by dropping things on us fully formed and fully grown, but by conceiving things small. The new world won't drop out of heaven like an asteroid, but will grow from the earth like a seed. The new just world will be conceived, like a baby is conceived, like John and Jesus were conceived, and then it will grow, and at each stage it will need you and me and many many more to nurture it and help it mature.

There is still much injustice in this world, but for every example of injustice, there are many examples of growing justice. But progress doesn't just drop out of heaven. Every bit of it has been struggled for tenaciously by people who would not give up their faith that justice demanded a different world. Sometimes it seems like we are taking a step back for every one we take forward, but I believe that every effort, every act of kindness, every thoughtful word, every letter you write, even though it may seem to fall on deaf ears, has an impact. I believe that, because I believe in a just God, who is at work birthing a more just world, through you and through me. Amen.