

“The Light of Joy”

Isaiah 55:1-13

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The 2nd Sunday in Advent

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Since the fall we've been exploring God's unfolding covenant. We've discovered how for God's people, their trust always ebbs and flows; and off and on, they question whether God's promise is real, whether God's word is sure.

Could Abraham trust, even when God called him to leave his home?

Could Joseph trust that God would remember him, even when he was sold by his brothers?

Could the Israelites, enslaved in Egypt, trust God to remember them and bring them out in safety?

Could David trust God's promise of an everlasting covenant with him, even when David abused his power and neglected his responsibility?

Could the people of the northern kingdom of Israel trust God to rescue them when they were taken by the Assyrians in 721 BC, as the early chapters of the book of Isaiah explore?

And now, in this latter part of Isaiah, we ask again: can the people of the southern kingdom of Judah trust God to rescue them? The verses we're about to hear from Isaiah 55 explore this question once more; for at the time it was written, sometime after 586 BC, the whole people of Judah had been taken over by the Babylonian empire. Judah's wealthy, educated leaders had all been rounded up and taken to Babylon. It is that experience that prompts the haunting song of lament: “By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept.” They didn't know whether their children or children's children would ever see their native land again. The only people remaining in Jerusalem and the rest of

Judah were the poor, left to fend for themselves. It was a time of deep uncertainty; a time, indeed, of terror. And no doubt they wondered, as their ancestors did: could they trust that God's covenant with them was sturdy? Could they trust God to remember them?

It's a question that doesn't go away, does it? It's just as true today, in our time of fear, in our time of weeping, in our time of uncertainty, in our time of terror: can we trust God's covenant with us? Can we trust God's word to us?

Listen now to the word of God ...

This week has been wrenching for the United States, as we watched the unfolding scene in California. At first there was uncertainty about the shootings in San Bernardino. Now it's abundantly clear: this premeditated act of carnage was inspired by the destructive terror of ISIS. And in our hearts, we knew: it was just a matter of time. Just a matter of time before the horrors of ISIS crossed the ocean to reach our shores.

The question now is this: how do we as a people respond to this infusion of uncertainty and terror? And there are any number of answers.

We could answer terrorism with fear ... and it would be understandable. There are plenty of reasons to be afraid. We don't know when a terrorist will strike again – whether a domestic terrorist like the troubled man behind the Planned Parenthood shootings, or an international terrorist like the ones who struck in California. We're in a new age, and it's scary. We could answer terrorism with fear.

We could answer terrorism with denial ... and it would be normal. Many of us just want to go about our daily business – attending to our loved ones, getting our work done, enjoying Christmas festivities, rolling up our sleeves to volunteer. Honestly, it’s hard to know what we can do to make a difference with terrorism anyway, so a perfectly reasonable response is to turn away and look in the other direction.

We could answer terrorism with political action ... and it would be appropriate. Some are calling for much tighter screening for immigrants; others are calling for wider social media surveillance. Still others are calling for sensible, reasonable gun control. Gun control, for example, that would bar the legal purchase of semiautomatic assault rifles by the same people who are barred from boarding airplanes now. We can answer terrorism with political action, with faithful stewardship of our precious political freedom.

So far, those are the most obvious answers. But what if ... what if there were something *more* we could do? And what if ... what if our *faith* had something particular to say to this mess of a world we’re living in?

I was struck by this notion on Friday. I was on my way to the city, driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and turned on “All Things Considered” on National Public Radio. As expected, host Robert Siegel interviewed *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. Siegel started out acknowledging the news “that Tashfeen Malik, the woman suspect, had declared her loyalty to ISIS.” Then he asked his guests “how to speak of it, how to react to this, how to prevent anything else like it” - which has all been on our minds this week.

I was deeply moved by David Brooks' answer. He said:

“Well, this was a terrorist act. It was an act of religious terrorism. And I think we're going to see an upsurge of religious terrorism in this century because we're going to see an upsurge in extremist forms of religion. And that's not because religion is bad, but religion creates groups. And there's some small, fringe minority in each group that want to kill people outside the group. ... Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote a book recently saying that the answer to religious terrorism is going to be found within religion and reinterpreting the text, and it's going to be done by religious people. Religious people listen to other religious people. And what has to happen is - we already have a theology of loyalty and love for people within the group. There has to be a theology of justice for people outside the group. And so it's up to religious leaders to really show how you can love your own group, but you've got to treat others with a form of justice. And I think it's - this is a war of ideas as much as anything else.”ⁱ

And I thought: wow. He's so right. This *is* religious terrorism. And it's crucial for religious people to speak to it - starting with courageous Muslim leaders who are stepping up to say this is *not* what Islam teaches. Islam instructs: "Serve Allah ... and do good: to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer" (Quran 4:36). NBC News reports, The Council on American-Islamic Relations — a nationwide advocacy organization — condemned the "horrific and revolting attack" and expressed deep sympathy to the family.ⁱⁱ Fox News reports the Imam of a major mosque in Dearborn Heights, Michigan “calling for religious and political leaders to unite to help prevent the next attack.”ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to these religious leaders for speaking out.

And it made me wonder: how are *we* reacting? What kind of word Christ's family sending out into the world? What religious answer can *we* provide to this religious terrorism as we fight in this war of ideas?

I'm touched by the reminder the Bible gives over and over and over again that we are not the first to experience uncertainty and fear, unsettling invasions and even acts of terror. How poignant that our very Scripture lesson from this morning – chosen long before the events of this past week –testifies to even worse an experience nearly 2500 years ago: the faithful nation of Judah wracked by enemies; their capital city overtaken; their finest leaders deported; their future entirely uncertain. Into that terrible time, the prophet Isaiah speaks a word of comfort and of hope; a word that promises the light of joy can never be extinguished. Let's look more closely at what Isaiah has to say.

First, as David Brooks points out, “There has to be a theology of justice for people outside the group. And so it's up to religious leaders to really show how you can love your own group, but you've got to treat others with a form of justice.”^{iv} And indeed, that's exactly what Isaiah says: that God's justice is for everyone – insiders and outsiders, people like us and those different from us. As the prophet Isaiah says, “*everyone* who thirsts, come to the waters; *everyone* who hungers, even you who have no money, come, be satisfied.” And doesn't Jesus say the same thing too? “Come to me, *all* who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” and “love your neighbors as yourself.” In the face of terror, our faith proclaims: *all* of the world's people are God's children, equally beloved by God.

Second, our faith proclaims that even the most evil are not forsaken by God, but are called back to the way of righteousness. As the prophet Isaiah says, “let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may abundantly pardon.” And isn't this what

Jesus says when he promises that God will welcome every prodigal home? Or when he tells us, “love your enemies; ... for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6.35-36). In the face of terror, our faith proclaims: God desires *every* evil spirit to be healed, and – absurdly – kindness and mercy are the greatest counter-terrorism tool we have.

Third, our faith proclaims that God’s word is sure; God’s promise is trustworthy. As the prophet Isaiah says, God’s word “will not return empty, but it will accomplish what it was sent to create”: justice and mercy, compassion and welcome. Isn’t this what Jesus tells us too, when he teaches, “the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – it is the smallest of all seeds, but it will become the greatest of trees, so that the birds come and make nests in its branches” (Matt. 13:31-32). In the face of terror, our faith proclaims: that the Lord still loves the world God once called “very good,” and God isn’t done with us yet.

David Brooks is right: now’s the time for religion to speak to religion, for faith to speak to faith. Precisely when our faith is tested. Precisely when we question whether we can really trust the strength of God’s word.

So let’s remind ourselves of the sure and certain promises of God: That we can go out in fear, but we will come back in joy. We can go out in war, but we will come back in peace. That instead of a thorn, a cypress will grow, an evergreen to testify to everlasting life. Instead of a brier-patch, myrtle will deck the halls. And instead of a submachine gun, a star will guide the wise men who still look for it. And instead of a terrorist, a baby will be born to reign in glory; a child will be born for us, to rule this world in love. And in the

midst of the darkness, the light has come, and the darkness can never, ever overcome it.

St. Paul once wrote a letter to a fearful people: the earliest Christians who were terrified of the Roman oppressor, who were terrified of their religious enemies. Paul wrote these words when he was imprisoned by his enemy, and had no idea whether he would ever see the light of day again. Listen to his advice to them – and to us:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4-7).

This is what our religion says to fear and terror. May it be so in your heart. And may it be so in your mouth, as you proclaim the Good News to this world that God so loved. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.npr.org/2015/12/04/458503838/week-in-politics-san-bernardino-calif-shooting-u-s-policy-on-syria>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/san-bernardino-shooting/san-bernardino-shooting-muslim-leaders-condemn-revolting-massacre-n473311>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.fox2detroit.com/news/local-news/55845973-story>

^{iv} <http://www.npr.org/2015/12/04/458503838/week-in-politics-san-bernardino-calif-shooting-u-s-policy-on-syria>