



**FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT/WORLD AIDS DAY
LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

Sunday, December 1, 2013

Raquel S. Lettsome, Lectionary Team Commentator

Lection – Isaiah 59:14-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. (v. 15) Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. (v. 16) He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

I wrote in the 2012 African American Lectionary commentary for World AIDS Day:

Advent, from the Latin word *adventus* (“coming”), is the liturgical season characterized by expectant waiting and preparation. During this season, we celebrate Christ’s coming into the world while expectantly waiting and preparing for his promised return. We are reminded that God is faithful, a fulfiller of promises made. We rejoice that God is Emmanuel, God with us, and that God’s presence among us brings light, joy, and hope even in our darkest situations. Perhaps that is why the consistent message given to humans during this season is “fear not” or “do not be afraid” (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:12, 30). This is the message of the liturgical season and this is the message to the church as we observe World AIDS Day.

World AIDS Day, established on December 1, 1988 by the World Health Organization, is an opportunity for the church to combat the fear, prejudice, and discrimination that affect those living with HIV. This is particularly significant for African American churches since the CDC reports that African Americans comprise 44% of all new HIV infections. By raising awareness of the global fight against HIV/AIDS, supporting those living with the virus, and commemorating those who have died, we show Christ’s redeeming love and demonstrate that God is with ALL of us, thereby giving hope to those infected with a disease that is often viewed as hopeless and outside the presence of God. The theme for World AIDS Day 2013 is “**Getting to Zero.**”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 59:14-16

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I did not grow up in a big gift-giving household. I received presents on two occasions: Easter and Christmas. On Easter, I received a basket with a chocolate bunny and candy. On Christmas, I received the exact gifts my father and I agreed upon from my wish list. There were no birthday gifts, graduation gifts, or special achievement gifts. But I could always count on Christmas and Easter.

No matter how rough the year was, regardless of my father’s employment status, if he said yes to a gift on my list, then I got it. Early Christmas morning, I was sure to find it under the tree with my father sitting nearby watching me open it. As a matter of fact, there was no promise my father did not keep. If he was not sure about his ability to deliver, I would get an “I’ll think about it” or a flat-out “no.” If he said yes, then I may not have known the details of how it would happen or how he would overcome the economic obstacles but I did know he would show up and do what he said.

Although my father is gone, Christmas still reminds me of my daddy. It reminds me that I have another Parent and not even death can take this One away. I have a Parent who will show up on time and do whatever was promised. This is just as sure as the presents I received during my childhood Christmas mornings because God proved God’s faithfulness (on the first Christmas morning) way before I came on scene.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Scripture passage for this Sunday falls within the section of Isaiah commonly called Second Isaiah (chapters 40–66). Written during the time of the fall of Babylon, this section of Isaiah expresses the hope and expectation of the exiled Jews' return to Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. Moreover, Isaiah's writings seek to show them how God has and will intervene in the course of human history to restore justice and righteousness.

Verse 14: This verse acknowledges the wrongdoing of the people of God. Isaiah personifies the ideals of justice ("rule that should guide"; also denoting "fair play")¹ and righteousness (right relationships between humans that promote well-being and right relationship between humans and God). Neither is present in the life of the community. It is not that they are absent, but that they have been actively rejected. Justice is "turned back." Righteousness, which is linked to justice, "stands back." The cultural environment is one that does not desire either, to be present, let alone set the standard for public discourse or interaction. Without justice and righteousness, truth does not have a leg to stand on and therefore it "stumbles" or "staggers," blocking the way of uprightness, which "cannot enter."

Verse 15: This verse paints an even grimmer picture. Truth has not only stumbled, it is now completely absent. Evil is so rampant that any who turn from it are captured or robbed. Although evil seems to have the upper hand, there is Another who is watching over this course of events.

Isaiah notes that it is YHWH (the Lord), the God of Israel who is not blind to what is going on. The Lord sees it. While the NRSV translates the Lord's reaction as "it displeased him," the Hebrew Bible captures the gravity of the situation. This situation was not merely displeasing, "it was evil in his eyes." The evil noted is the absence of justice.

Verse 16: Not only is there no justice, there is no one to intervene. The Lord is "appalled" or astonished by this fact. However, the situation is not met with judgment but with Divine compassion. God's displeasure does not evoke punishment but the Divine presence. Through the strength of God's own arm, God brings victory. The absence of righteousness among humans in this instance is no big matter. God's own righteousness will sustain him.

The season of Advent is a time to renew our hope in God. It is so easy to put our trust in people and let situations control our outlook. We can be discouraged and even frozen in fear and apathy by the evil we see. Indeed, we know all too well about the absence of justice and are made to feel that it is just us (we are alone in this fight). Righteousness is often hard to find. So often, things appear insurmountable when we cannot figure out how to overcome and are confronted with our physical, mental, financial, and moral weaknesses.

As we commemorate another World AIDS Day, we are reminded again of our inability to eradicate that which seeks to destroy us. **However, just because we cannot do everything does not mean we cannot do something.** Nor does it mean that the something we do is worthless. We can seek to bring justice, righteousness, and truth back into the public square, into the places of our communal discussion. We can begin in the church to combat lies and prejudices with truth, and we can advocate for justice and righteousness in the care and treatment of those infected with HIV/AIDS. We can refuse to allow truth to stumble in our pulpits, or justice to be

turned back from our sanctuaries, or righteousness to stand far from our pews, or uprightness to be blocked in our vestibules.

Indeed, we can look around to see what needs to be done. We may feel there is no one to intervene and our displeasure can easily turn to despair. Yet this passage reminds us to look up and not just around, to put our hope in God. We are encouraged to expect God to intervene when humans fail. This is the message and hope of the Christmas season—that God does show up at our moments of greatest need. God does not leave us to our own devices, but even God’s displeasure gives way to divine action on our behalf.

Celebration

The celebration in this lection is found in verses 15b-16. When it seems like no one cares or is taking note of the evil that is going on, God sees and God acts. God does not leave us to our own devices but personally gets involved and steps in. When we look around for help and there is no one, we must remember to look up because there is One, whose strength is sufficient, and when human hands are unwilling this One can bring victory with his own arm. This One is altogether righteous. Expect this One to step down into your situation, into your problem, into your home, into your church, and into your life.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: Lies being told; truth not getting a hearing; arguments; fighting; confusion; sighs of despair; moans; pleading for justice; prayers for people to do what is right; cries of the oppressed and abused; the laughter of those getting away with injustice and unrighteousness;

Sights: Unfair balances; kangaroo courts; God looking from heaven with displeasure; God looking for someone to rectify the injustice; a strong arm; a foot coming out of heaven as God steps down to earth to do it Godself;

Smells: Perfume and aromas of rich food of those who have; poverty; decay and rot of those who are struggling; and

Tastes: The bitterness of despair; bile of hopelessness; and small tastes of hope.

III. Other Suggestions for Preachers and Teachers

Songs

- For a list of hymns for Advent (or any topic) with free downloadable recordings, go to: www.LNWhymns.com.

Quotations

- I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.
—Thomas Jefferson²
- I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it's for or against.
—Malcolm X³
- I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.
—Abraham Lincoln⁴
- The moral arc of the universe bends at the elbow of justice.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵

Notes

1. j.b.p. (1996). Justice. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible Dictionary* (D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer & D. J. Wiseman, Ed.) (3rd ed.) (634). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

2. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/t/thomasjeff157225.html#iQo8dD7vIWROGKIG.99>.

3. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/malcolmx385966.html#r9ImBb44tS7epFkU.99>.

4. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/abrahamlin133231.html#6qVVmqMfkAM7sDSX.99>.

5. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth110202.html#SMAVpzYwysd6DIDw.99>.