



## **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT & WORLD AIDS DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, November 29, 2009**

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**Lection – Isaiah 60:19-22 & Matthew 22:34-40** (New Revised Standard Version)

#### **Isaiah 60:19-22**

(v.19) The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. (v. 20) Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. (v. 21) Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified. (v. 22) The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly.

#### **Matthew 22:34-40**

(v. 34) When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, (v.35) and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him (v. 36) “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (v. 37) He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. (v. 38) This is the greatest and first commandment. (v. 39) And a second is like it:

‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (v. 40) On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

The World Health Organization established the observance of World AIDS Day in 1988 to help government and non-profit organizations increase awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>1</sup> It is observed annually on December 1. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there are 33.2 million people worldwide living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, approximately 38% of the AIDS deaths are among African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, African American church leaders have made a more concerted effort to educate their congregations on the impact of HIV/AIDS in the African American community. These efforts involve addressing the general silence within many churches about HIV/AIDS, its transmission, and matters of sex and sexuality more broadly.

Advent marks the season on the Christian calendar for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Advent, which means “coming” or “arrival,” is a time of hope and anticipation. As Christian churches celebrate the hope embodied in the birth of Jesus Christ, they simultaneously anticipate his return to reconcile the world to God. This dual celebration of past and future reminds us that Christ has already come as our hope of salvation, that he is among us in the world today as our source of comfort and strength, and that he will come again to reign in victory with all power in his hands.<sup>4</sup>

The union of World AIDS Day and the First Sunday of Advent is fitting because it enables clergy leaders to relate the hope of God in Christ to the experience of those living with HIV/AIDS. Observing Advent and World AIDS Day at the same time provides a perfect opportunity for the church to show the depths of God’s love and the breadth of God’s saving grace for all of God’s children.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 60:19-22**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter**

As pastor of a traditional black Baptist church, I am acutely aware of the social stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS. This is in large part buttressed by the general theological conservatism in the pulpit and in the pews, particularly on issues of human sexuality, and sexual health and responsibility. I have attempted to address this in a variety of ways. First, I have sought to give members a broader set of theological and interpretive tools for responding to complex social issues. Secondly, I look for opportunities to dispel latent assumptions about “who” has HIV/AIDS, and who is likely to contract it. In one sermon, for example, I mentioned that with the availability of male enhancement drugs in recent years (and we all know the brands), seniors represented one of the fastest growing groups contracting HIV/AIDS as unprotected sexual activity increases among seniors.<sup>5</sup> By modeling a culture of compassion, I have found more and more of my members

approaching me about their struggles dealing HIV/AIDS in their families. This led me to start an annual HIV/AIDS Awareness Day in our church to help equip members with the necessary resources to address this issue with compassion.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The first Sunday in Advent traditionally represents expectation, hope, or prophecy (in some traditions). It is a time when the church not only celebrates the hope of the coming Christ, but also yearns for healing and deliverance of a fallen and broken world.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, on this Sunday, African American churches, in anticipation of the coming Messiah, reflect on the wounds of the world that encompass sickness, war, injustice, discrimination, poverty, oppression, and all manner of evil.

The anticipation of the coming Messiah, however, is not a time for prayer and reflection alone; but rather, the church must take an active role in reaching out to those who are crying out under the weight of despair. Many in the African American community who are living with HIV/AIDS have lost hope. They are disillusioned by the rejection of many African American churches. They face unimaginable fear and misinformation around HIV/AIDS. They are despairing over endless doctor's appointments, challenges in securing medication, and complications associated with the disease. Moreover, many feel isolated and stigmatized by their families and their communities. They are dogged by one challenge after another. Isaiah 60 has a word for them—God has not forgotten us.

The general scholarly consensus is that the Book of Isaiah was written by multiple authors and subject to extensive redaction. The “author(s)” of Isaiah 60 are commonly referred to as Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah, and the chapter contains prophetic interpretations of historical events expressed as poetic visions of the unfolding of God's plan for the restoration of Jerusalem. The statement in verse 21, “They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands” lends credence to the assertion that these prophetic visionary descriptions are based upon actual historical events. While it is difficult to precisely locate Isaiah 60:19-22, its poetic language should be read against the backdrop of Jewish efforts to return and rebuild Jerusalem amidst a host of spiritual challenges from within the community, and a myriad of social challenges from without.

Despite these challenges, Isaiah 60 encourages God's people to take responsibility for their own actions, while reminding them of God's promises to the covenant community. Third Isaiah reminds returning exiles to hold on to their mission as a light to the world because God has not forgotten them.

Verses 19-22 return to the imagery of light and glory present at the beginning of the chapter. This writer provides a glimpse into the future glory of Zion when Israel will arise out of her darkness because the Lord will be the light for the returned exiles. The restoration of God's people in the city of peace comes as the reign of God brings righteousness, prosperity, and hope. It is important that the word “righteous” in verse 21 not be interpreted in light of Protestant theological definitions or ideas of justification. Here, the writer is in all likelihood envisioning an idyllic age when the entire community of God's people is vindicated by God. This will be a great time of rejoicing, for in the

New Jerusalem there will be no more suffering, no more sickness, no more trials, and no more tribulations. The New Jerusalem will serve as the light to all nations. As a result, there will be no need for the sun or the moon to continue on its cycle because the glory of God will be their everlasting light. These verses conclude with the assertion that God is active in human history because the Lord “will accomplish this quickly.”

In our second passage, Matthew 22:34-40, Jesus has just confounded the Sadducees with his teaching on the question of the resurrection. They were attempting to determine whether the teachings of Jesus contradicted the teachings of Moses. In like manner, the Pharisees now seek to aggressively interrogate Jesus about another highly debated theological question of the day. Their query had to do with which of the many commandments in the Law of Moses was the greatest. These religious scholars were accustomed to categorizing the Mosaic laws in a manner that would enable them to privilege the more important or “greater” laws, and regard as secondary those of lesser importance. The Pharisees sought to engage Jesus in one of their many legal disputes with hopes of getting him to deny or usurp the authority of Moses. Doing so would enable them to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people.

Contrary to their expectations, Jesus roots his response within the Mosaic legal tradition by subordinating the entire framework of the Law to two related commandments. The first commandment comes from the *Shema*, the Jewish confession of faith found in Deuteronomy 6:5, and emphasizes the responsibility of God’s people to love God with their entire being. The second commandment is a quote from Leviticus 19:18, and emphasizes the responsibility of God’s people to show their love of God by loving their neighbor. This commitment to the ethic of love is not just emotional, but is behavioral and involves the total self.

Jesus’ response makes the case that the essence of true religion is not in religious debate and disputation, but rather manifests itself in caring for the welfare of others. All of the other ceremonial and moral laws are met through the application of these two commandments. Love, not meticulous ritual observance, becomes the guiding theological principle for evaluating the spiritual life. With that said, the reader should avoid the tendency to place Love and Law in opposition as is common in some theological readings of this text. Instead, the principle here is that God’s Law is the law of Love. They are inseparable.

### **Challenge**

Regardless of one’s theological stance on matters of sex and sexuality, the question becomes whether clergy leaders can develop a language of love and a culture of compassion in the church where people can receive help, hope, and healing. Every African American congregation should have an awareness initiative that focuses on education, prevention, provides HIV/AIDS screening, and/or establishes a community of support for those living with or supporting loved ones with the disease. Pastors and clergy leaders can also set the example by getting tested before their members, and

encouraging parishioners to get tested as well. This is a season of change. Let us end the stigma and stop the silence around HIV/AIDS so that we can stop its spread.

### **Descriptive Details**

Isaiah 60 and Matthew 22 have the following descriptive features:

#### Isaiah 60: 19-22:

**Sights:** The sun and the moon – the great luminaries of heaven (v. 19); the light – to illuminate (v. 19); day – radiance (v. 19); brightness – the splendor, brilliant glorious appearance (v. 19); night – darkness and obscurity; glory- the brightness of the heavenly bodies (v. 19); a shoot - the spiritual growth of Israel as the branch and God as the righteous vine (v. 20); the hand of God planting – God has planted the nation on a firm foundation (v. 21);

**Time:** Everlasting - continuous existence (v. 19); forever – infinite (v. 21);

**Sounds:** Mourning - sighing, groaning, expression of grief or physical distress of Israel.

**Taste:** The salty tears from Israel’s groanings (v. 20); and

**Direction:** Down – the light shone upon Israel shall not go down or get dimmer (v. 20).

#### Matthew 22: 34-40

**Sounds:** Silenced – the hush of the Sadducees in response to Jesus (v. 34); gathered – the hurried assembling of the Pharisees (v. 34); and

**Sights:** Gathered – the huddling of the Pharisees (v. 34) greatest – which command is highly significant (v. 36).

### **III. Resources**

#### **General Information**

- Balm in Gilead, The Black Church Institute for HIV/AIDS. Online location: [www.balmingilead.org](http://www.balmingilead.org)

#### **Fact sheets**

- Download HIV/AIDS fact sheets then, post them on bulletin boards, share with local newspapers, and distribute them at events! Online location: [www.hhs.gov/aidsawarenessdays/days/black/index.html](http://www.hhs.gov/aidsawarenessdays/days/black/index.html)
- Read the CDC’s HIV Incidence data. Online location: at [www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/incidence.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/incidence.htm)

## Websites

- [AIDS.gov](http://AIDS.gov): the gateway to Federal domestic HIV/AIDS prevention, testing, treatment, research information.
- [PEPFAR.gov](http://PEPFAR.gov): the official website of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.
- [worldaidscampaign.org](http://worldaidscampaign.org): for brochures and information about events worldwide.

## Mobile Resource

To find an HIV Testing location near you, send a text message with your zip code to KNOWIT (566948) or visit [www.hivtest.org](http://www.hivtest.org).

## Notes

1. World Health Organization. "Who and HIV/Aids." Online location: <http://www.who.int> accessed 5 August 2009
2. United States. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Aids Awareness Days. "World Aids Day." Online location: [www.hhs.gov/aidsawarenessdays/days/world](http://www.hhs.gov/aidsawarenessdays/days/world) accessed 5 August 2009
3. The Avert organization. "HIV and African Americans." Online location: <http://www.avert.org/hiv-african-americans.htm> accessed 5 August 2009
4. Biddle, Perry H. Jr., Ed. Preaching the Lectionary: A Workbook for Year C. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991. p. 27
5. Entwisle, Stephen. "HIV/AIDS and the Older Person." Pdf online location: <http://www.aidsalgary.org/resources/publications.cfm>; See also, "Who is at Risk: Elderly." Online location: <http://www.aidsalgary.org/education/whoisatrisk/elderly.cfm> accessed 5 August 2009
6. See Hessel, Dieter T., Ed. Social Themes on the Christian Year: A Commentary on the Lectionary. Philadelphia, PA: Geneva, 1983; and Preaching and Worshipping in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005. pp. 163-169