

“Isaiah, Yesterday and Today”

A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas

30 November 2008

***Isaiah 64:1-9 + Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 + 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 +
Mark 13:24-37***

I spent [last] Sunday afternoon brooding over a great piece of Times reporting by Eric Dash and Julie Creswell about Citigroup. Maybe brooding isn't the right word. The front-page article, entitled “Citigroup Pays for a Rush to Risk,” actually left me totally disgusted.

Why? Because in searing detail it exposed — using Citigroup as Exhibit A — how some of our country's best-paid bankers were overrated dopes who had no idea what they were selling, or greedy cynics who did know and turned a blind eye. But it wasn't only the bankers. This financial meltdown involved a broad national breakdown in personal responsibility, government regulation, and financial ethics.

So many people were in on it: People who had no business buying a home, with nothing down and nothing to pay for two years; people who had no business pushing such mortgages, but made fortunes doing so; people who had no business bundling those loans into securities and selling them to third parties, as if they were AAA bonds, but made fortunes doing so; people who had no business rating those loans as AAA, but made fortunes doing so; and people who had no business buying those bonds and putting them on their balance sheets so they could earn a little better yield, but made fortunes doing so.

Citigroup was involved in, and made money from, almost every link in that chain. And the bank's executives, including, sad to see, the former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, were clueless about the reckless financial instruments they were creating, or were so ensnared by the cronyism between the bank's risk managers and risk takers (and so bought off by their bonuses) that they had no interest in stopping it.

These are the people whom taxpayers bailed out on Monday to the tune of what could be more than \$300 billion.

So wrote Tom Friedman in Wednesday's New York Times. Biblical prophecy, it turns out, is not ended, only changed. Indeed, so long as our souls are hollow, God will continue to send prophets in all sorts of forms, including newspaper columnists.

Our world seems very different today than it did on the first Sunday of Advent 2007, though undoubtedly it would be recognizable to Isaiah, despite the span of the nearly 2700 years that separate his time from ours.

For Isaiah was above all else a prophet profoundly troubled by the rottenness of the human soul. Abraham Heschel describes the well-connected prophet, who began his career at a time of political intrigue, in this way:

Isaiah's primary concern is not Judah's foreign policy, but rather the inner state of the nation. In the period in which he begins his prophecy, there is prosperity in the land. The king is astute, the priests are proud, and the market place is busy. Placid, happy, even gay, the people... buy, sell, celebrate, rejoice, but Isaiah is consumed with distress.

The prophet is distraught because, to borrow the language of our latter-day Isaiah, everywhere he looks, he sees overrated dopes and greedy cynics – and the consequences of a social order run by them. Seeing the suffering of human lives made hard by such a society, he feels God’s grief and anger. Sound familiar?

The issue that haunts Isaiah’s soul Heschel memorably describes as this contradiction: *How marvelous is the world that God has created! And how horrible is the world that man has made!... The human mind seems to have no sense for the true dimension of man’s cruelty to man.*

Advent calls us to something better, calls us to trust and hope and expectant waiting. But trust and hope in what? Expectant waiting for whom? For God to tear open the heavens and incarnate among us! That’s what, that’s whom. As Christian people of faith, we believe this has occurred and will occur again.

But sometimes we followers of Christ tend to spiritualize Advent and sentimentalize Christmas. I don’t think that is the way of Isaiah, and I don’t think that is a luxury we can afford this year.

What if we take instead as our beginning point Elie Wiesel’s remark that Moses and Isaiah alone among the prophets understood what they prophesied. Where all other prophets spoke their powerful words – the word of God – *in a kind of altered state*, Moses and Isaiah understood the words they spoke. They were **conscious**.

To be conscious, to see clearly, is the only possible antidote to the human mind that prefers to live placidly and happily in self-deception, unconscious and unaware of the cost of our actions or inactions, and the ways they impact others as well as our own souls. Isaiah calls us, as Heschel says forcefully, to look inward, to consider our inner state as a community and as individuals.

In whom do we trust? God, or our own strengths and accomplishments? Who am I when I am not priest or analyst or father or husband? Who are you beneath all of those outer labels with which you describe and, if you are at all like me, *defend* yourselves?

Can we see ourselves clearly, live consciously? It's not easy. And what about seeing others clearly? Isaiah, as you may remember, has a keen concern for the widowed and orphaned, for the most vulnerable. Today, many have been made vulnerable by the dopes and cynics in our government and cultural institutions.

We see increased vulnerability in our own congregation, where besides the "usual" illnesses and pastoral concerns, we now have people struggling against difficult odds to make ends meet. We see increased vulnerability in our neighborhood and in our ministries, where the demand for help with Christmas presents and food is rising dramatically.

We see great sums spent for bailouts – however necessary these may be -- of AIG, Citigroup, and others, but not much assistance to the neediest in our society.

Isaiah, I am sure, would be anguished by the news I heard from Manny Borg recently that the Franciscan Outreach Soup Kitchen he has run for 15 years, and where many of us have volunteered, is in such dire financial straits that the soup kitchen or one of its allied programs likely will close.

Perhaps it is an inevitable part of the human condition that we will always have with us the dopes and the cynics, and their unconsciousness will cause more suffering especially for the poor and vulnerable. Yet this Advent feels different from all other Advents I have known, and I believe its call to each of us is two-fold: consciousness and compassion.

May we strive to be conscious of the dope and the cynic in each of us, and of the ways our self-deceptions harm others.

And, then, may our compassion and generosity be lavish.

- May we, to the best of our ability, buy Christmas presents for children in need.
- No matter how cold it may be or where else we'd rather be, may we willingly go door to door with bags that ask our neighbors to help us in this important ministry.
- May we look with love upon each member of this community and offer emotional and other support to those among us who struggle.

This Advent is different, and so instead of quietly, patiently awaiting the coming of the Christ child, maybe this year our call is to **be** Christ, the powerful one who already has come, and is in our midst, offering love – tangible, embodied, practical love -- for each of us. Isaiah would be pleased.