

Date: December 5, 2004

SUNDAY: Advent 2

SERMON: Bifocal Faith

Text(s): Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

© 2004 L. R. Kalajainen

One year when I was still a child in elementary school, my neighbor got a new telescope for Christmas. I still remember the feeling I had when he set that telescope up in his backyard one night and I got my first close-up glimpse of the moon. Looking back on it, it wasn't all that powerful a telescope; it was just a child's toy, but at the time, it seemed wonderful. It opened up new worlds for us as we explored the heavens and saw things we couldn't see before, or at least hadn't seen as clearly. Some of that same awe, I think, we all still felt a few years ago when we saw the pictures taken by the Hubble telescope of the birth of stars millions of light-years out in space.

Another year, my parents gave me a microscope for Christmas. And that opened up a different world for me. Not the world of the very far and very large, but the world of the very close and very small. To learn that in a single drop of water from a pond that appeared perfectly clear to the naked eye, there were all those wriggling little paramecia and amoebas was quite an education.

Our life takes place somewhere in between those two extremes of vision and reality. We live in the middle distance as it were. We walk around with the vast reaches of space and the countless millions of stars above us, and for the most part, we don't even think about them, much less gaze at them constantly through a telescope. Most of the time, to us, they are just shimmering points of light in the night sky, and we even trivialize them with childish bits of rhyme: "Twinkle, twinkle little star."

We are just as indifferent to the microscopic world as well, most of the time. We don't go about our daily lives keenly aware that countless billions of bacteria and viruses and other tiny, invisible things are all around us. We

only pay attention to them when enough microscopic grains of pollen from the ragweed makes us sneeze or when we open our refrigerators and see some new form of life developing in a jar of very old spaghetti sauce.

Our Old Testament lesson today provides us with a look through the telescope. Isaiah's vision of the shoot from the stump of Jesse who will one day usher in and reign over a peaceful and just world in which lions eat straw, and wolves lie down with lambs, and children play safely near the den of deadly cobras is a long-distance vision. In the nearer distance, the old joke about this passage seems more true: The wolf may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb isn't going to get much sleep.

I certainly didn't have that vision of the peaceable kingdom in sight our first Palm Sunday in Malaysia when we were getting the kids dressed for church, and suddenly our *amah* who was down in the kitchen began screaming "Snake is in the house! Snake is in the house." I ran downstairs, and there in the middle of the children's play area, surrounded by their toys, was a cobra. It wasn't a very big one, less than a yard long. But I have to confess, my immediate thought was not that the vision of Isaiah might at long last be coming to pass. My immediate reaction was to grab the bamboo stick that I kept near the door and whack that cobra dead on the spot. I wasn't placing my bets on the clarity of Isaiah's long-range vision at that moment.

The reality we see around us every day, the reality of the middle distance in which we live is nothing like Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. What we see are our soldiers fighting and dying in Iraq, along with thousands of Iraqis, both combatants and civilians caught in the crossfire. What we see are Israelis and Palestinians continuing to tear at each other in a fruitless and senseless struggle that just goes on and on from generation to generation. What we see with our middle-distance vision are the deep political, cultural, and religious divisions within our own country, where even a television commercial created and paid for by the United Church of

Christ, proclaiming a message of welcome to anyone who comes through our doors, is deemed too controversial by the three major networks to allow it to be shown, while near-pornographic commercials for Victoria's Secret lingerie or violent "Kill Kennedy" video games don't so much as raise a question. Without a telescopic lens like Isaiah offers us, what hope would we have that things can ever be better, that there's even a chance for us or for our children and grandchildren to live in peace? Yet still we long for that kingdom of peace that Isaiah's telescope reveals to us.

Sometimes, that deep yearning for a better world has led us to try to achieve it with sheer hard work and through social and political action. Liberal Protestantism, in the early part of the last century, espoused the view that if we all just worked hard enough and with enough good will, we could build this kingdom of God on earth all by ourselves. Fueled by a theology that stressed the essential goodness of human nature coupled with a naive optimism about human systems and institutions, Christians threw themselves into the social and political struggles to combat racism and poverty and injustice with supreme confidence that sweet reason and goodwill would produce the kingdom of God.

And thank God they did! Somebody needed to do it, or there would have been no civil rights movement, no laws against child labor, no universal education or any of the other progressive social legislation that we take for granted. For while liberal theology was too optimistic about human nature and too confident about the results of human effort, it was at least clear in its vision of that peaceable kingdom. It had a clear line of sight through Isaiah's telescope.

The fatal weakness in the old liberal Protestantism was the fact that while its vision of the kingdom was clear, its vision of the way to get there was cloudy. It couldn't see that the very thing that would prevent human beings from

building the kingdom of God on earth, was human nature itself. Isaiah's telescope is not enough by itself. What we need to complement it is the microscope offered to us by Matthew in our Gospel lesson.

Just to keep our feet firmly on the ground so that we don't get lost in the rosininess of Isaiah's vision of the future, or despair of our inability to achieve it by our own efforts, John the Baptist appears out of the wilderness and shouts at us, "*You brood of vipers; who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Bear fruit that is worthy of repentance. . . Do not presume to say, 'Well, we're all right. We're on the inside track with God. After all, we've got an illustrious spiritual pedigree with Abraham as our father. I tell you, that the axe is already chopping at the root of the tree, and the tree is about to fall. I, indeed baptize you with water for repentance, but one is coming after me who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.'*"

John knows, as we must learn, if we're going to see clearly, that there can be no better world for human beings to live in until there are better human beings to live in that world. The two visions are, in reality, one. We simply need bifocal vision in order to see both the near and the far distance clearly at the same time. In order to maintain hope in that world where wolves and lambs can lie down together, where children can safely play with cobras, where the knowledge of the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, we have to focus clearly on the things within us that prevent us from getting nearer to that peaceable kingdom. We have to take our capacity for evil seriously.

An illustrious alumni of Bowdoin, who has sat in this sanctuary, wrote many stories on this very theme and also provide us with the microscope we need to see ourselves clearly. I'm speaking of Nathaniel Hawthorne. One of my favorite Hawthorne stories is *Earth's Holocaust*. In it, he imagined that all the earth's peoples had

somehow evolved in their moral consciousness sufficiently that they were ready to cooperate and get rid of all the evils that had ever plagued humankind. Representatives from all nations gather on one of the great plains in the American mid-west, and there they ignite an enormous bonfire to burn up everything that has ever produced evil. All the world's books full of competing political ideologies, all the world's armaments, all the drugs and alcohol—on and on the list goes, and the bonfire rises ever higher. Finally, everything that has ever produced evil has gone into the flames, and there is universal rejoicing and celebrating that at last, the peaceable kingdom has arrived. Well, almost universal rejoicing. Out on the edges of this vast crowd, there are a few people who aren't too thrilled by all of this. One is a man who really enjoys going to the tavern to have a drink with his friends, and he's reserved one last bottle of whiskey to console himself with. Nearby is a disgruntled burglar who's trying to figure out what he's going to do for a living now that there's nothing left to steal, and stealing is no longer politically correct anyway. And while they're commiserating with each other, a dark stranger appears. (In Hawthorne, the dark stranger is always the Devil.) And this dark stranger says, "Be not so cast down, my dear friends; you shall see good days yet. There's one thing that these wiseacres have forgotten to throw into the fire, without which the whole conflagration is just nothing at all; yea, though they burned the earth itself to a cinder."

The disgruntled group eagerly ask what this one thing is. And the dark stranger replies, "What but the human heart itself. And unless they hit upon some method of purifying that foul cavern, forth from it will reissue all the shapes of wrong and misery— the same old shapes and worse ones— that they have taken such a vast deal of trouble to consume to ashes. I have stood by this live-long night and laughed in my sleeve at the whole business. O, take my word for it, it

will be the same old world yet."¹

And so it will, unless enough of us develop both the telescopic and microscopic vision we need to see in the foreground our deep inner need for repentance, for transformation of our inmost motives and desires and habits of the heart. At the same time, we can keep clearly in view in the distance, the future of the world as God intends it to be. Without the microscope of repentance, we cannot avoid the evil that lurks in the dark and complex recesses of our hearts; without the telescope of hope, we risk falling into despair. With both lenses, we find the energy to work unceasingly toward that vision of the peaceable kingdom, not with naive optimism in our own goodness or capabilities, but with hearts continuously purified by repentance, with humility and acknowledgment of our own weaknesses. We can also work confidently with the courage and hope borne of our trust in the living God of history who makes all things new. Out of the dead stump of Jesse, a new branch shoots forth. And in that new life, which we begin to experience here and now in ourselves, is the Advent promise of a new future for the whole world.

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Earth's Holocaust," Selected Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed., Alfred Kazin, New York: Fawcett Publications, 1966, 196.

