

Evil Times or A Better Way

Scripture: Isaiah 57:11-16
Ephesians 5:15-20

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Text – Ephesians 5:

Be careful then how you live, not as
unwise people but as wise, making the
most of the time, because the days are
evil.

THE GRACE OF OUR TEACHER AND LIBERATOR, JESUS
CHRIST BE WITH YOU ALL!

INTRODUCTION

In a newsletter that I read a pastor was saying to her congregation that in preparing for Advent, the season of hope, we would do well to take a long and hard look at the various negatives in our lives and in our world. She was saying that if we take off the blinders and become truly aware of the depth and extent of the problems we face, we would be better prepared to accept and appreciate the hopeful perspective of advent. This is the task that I have set for myself in this sermon; because, as our text says, we do live in evil days. Days of genocides and religion-inspired war and drug related violence, days of epidemic AIDS and obesity, days of poverty and an ever widening gap between the richest and the poorest, the day of the Hummer and a war that sacrifices dozens of Iraqi citizens and several American soldiers every day to fill it up with gas. We grow calloused by the incessant news of deaths of Iraqi citizens and even by the pictures of dead American soldiers. These are the days in which, as the writer of the 57th chapter of Isaiah says, “The righteous perish and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away while no one understands”.

Let not the recent election, if anyone here rejoiced in the outcome, obscure the reality in which we live. One indication of

how evil the times really were, according to the prophet, is that the people were blind to the evil in them. Having grown weakened by their excesses, they could not bring themselves to say “there is no hope” according to one translation or to say “these ways are useless” according to another. We also tend to be blind to how bad the times really are. You remember this line from the Beetles?: “I saw a film today. O Boy!” Recently, that film for me was “An Inconvenient Truth” not only because it describes the terrible truth about global warming and its consequences but even moreso because it describes how resistant we are to acknowledging this truth. Kofi Annan at the UN has recently bemoaned the fact of this resistance on the part of certain nations’ leaders. The unspoken question that lies behind the film and behind so many of today’s realities is, “Just what will it take to make us make us take off the blinders and change our ways?”

About 530 BCE, when our passage in Isaiah was written, the exiles had returned from Babylon to their homeland. It was beginning to dawn on them that their promised homecoming would not be the wonderful thing that they had expected – that, in fact, their life might be even more of a morass of infidelity, idolatry and injustice than before the deportation to Babylon. The writer is trying to deal with the evil days that were unanticipated.

Likewise in the letter to the Ephesians, probably written around the year 80 in the name of Paul, but not by Paul, where we find this curious bit of vague advice which we have taken for our text: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise” The Christian churches were just beginning to understand that the promised reign of God on earth would not happen in their lifetime. The oppressive Roman occupation had not only continued long after the Resurrection but, worse, the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem scattering both Jews and Christians (who were also Jews) to the four winds. Life in the time of the Resurrected Christ, which is also our time, was not going to be what they had thought it might be. In fact, the times would be evil, just like they were before! This is the hard-won recognition that lies behind the

writer's rather strange admonition: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise."

Unanticipated evil times! We know about that too. Remember the great expectations the people had in 1989-90 when the Iron Curtain fell and the terrible burdens and fears of the Cold War lifted? Now the nations of the world could finally turn their weapons into plowshares. All that money that had been going into defense budgets could now go to educating our children, bringing quality health care to the entire populace, and promoting the general welfare. But it was not to be: "I read the news today. O boy!" I do not need to recite the horrific history from 1990 to today. You know it. You certainly feel it in your bones – all 17 years of the cloudy skies and stormy weather of unfulfilled expectations. These are our unanticipated evil times – a reality, in fact, of every generation.

THE MARK OF EVERY GENERATION

The New Testament theologian, Walter Wink, describes something he calls the "domination system" that endures from generation to generation and permeates all aspects of our existence. The violence that women and children, minorities and the general populace experience unmasks the domination system for what it is: real, pervasive and cruel and unjust. In an earlier day we might have let this stand as a description of original sin. But no matter what we call it, the domination system defines the context of our lives in every generation; and the biblical witness is that there can be no justification for overlooking it, denying it, or trying to cover it up.

Most everyone around us, everyone not living in gated, insulated communities, is, in one way or another, in a struggle for their sanity, their security or their very lives. And since these evil days are a reality in every generation, let us resist the temptation to gloss over or deny the evil of our own time. Let us "live not as unwise people but as wise". The singer, Ben Harper has a song

called “Better Way” in which he sings, “fools will be fools and wise will be wise but I will look this world straight in the eyes”; and when he looks at the world as it really is, he sees “reality is sharp/it cuts at me like a knife/everyone I know/ is in the fight of their life”. And this is the fact of our life that, as believers, we dare not avoid.

OUR PART

I confess that as I talk about these evil days, I have a tendency to separate myself, from all those things that I see as symptomatic of our situation – as if I were standing on a “high and lofty place” – the place, as a matter of fact that the prophet ascribes to God: “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, David Bos” Well, the truth is that I and you and we all contribute something to making these days as evil as they are.

There was a slogan on the wall of a neighborhood community ministry: “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem” The truth is, that even as we try to be part of the solution, you and I are part of the problem no matter how we shake it. The Pauline letters are full of frustration because of this complicity. “You were once darkness, but now you are light”. “Well then, live as children of light, for goodness sake. Don’t get drunk with wine. Be filled instead with the Holy Spirit. Your silly and vulgar talk is entirely out of place. Instead, let there be thanksgiving. Don’t be like children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourself with the a new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. What a struggle! And Paul implicated himself: “The good that I would, I do not; and the very thing that I would not, that I do”.

It is thoroughly and truly Pauline and biblical to become aware of how much we are all implicated in these evil days. There is no way that we can extract ourselves, by ourselves, from the evil that surrounds us. For, as the writer of Ephesians says in the 6th chapter, “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. Can we really accept and confess this inherent weakness of ours? The prophet cuts to the chase when he asks: “Whom did you dread and fear so that you lied and did not remember me or give me a thought? You know, we are fearful creatures - fearful enough of the powers that be that we cannot entertain the possibilities that God opens to us. We are so afraid; we even will elect and follow rulers whose only virtue is to play on our fears. In our time do we ever hear a politician say, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”. No, because the politicians have learned just how far we will sink to buy a promise of a smidgen of security.

And so Isaiah says, “I concede your righteousness and your works but they will not help you.” In other words, as one interpreter has it, “Your good deeds and your worship is just a sham and a cover up because you are afraid to deal with the corruption of these times” You will go to church and you will salve your conscience with things like emergency food and clothing, but you are too timid to ask why a person can work a 40 hour week and still not earn enough to get above the poverty line – a condition that now affects between 15 and 20% of all workers in the United States while their bosses are bringing home obscenely high levels of compensation. You are too timid to call this what it is literally – slave labor – much less do anything about it. This is the prophet’s searing condemnation that really no one among us can escape. We perpetuate the poverty of our times by doing good works without getting at the causes of it.

A BETTER WAY

Now the prophet offers us a better way: “Build up, build up, prepare the way./”, says the text, “remove every obstruction from my people’s way./ “I dwell in the high and lofty place,/ and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,/ to revive the spirit of the humble,/ and to revive the heart of the contrite./ For I will not continually accuse,/ nor will I always be angry...”

We stand convicted; but the prophet promises that God is faithful and just – that if we will face the evil days and name them for what they are, and if we confess our own part, God will show us a better way – a way of true joy and healing and peace – a way where God actually walks with us, dwells with us.

“Sleepers awake” the writer of Ephesians says - that is awake from accepting things as they are, awake from your complicity with such things. Face the truth and then get up and make the most of the time – redeem the time! Rise from your dead, fearful selves. Let God in Christ liberate you from them. Certainly one way that we can sum up the message of Jesus is in those words from the letter of John: “Perfect love casts out fear” - an echo of the angel voices at Jesus birth “Fear not for I bring you good tidings of great joy”, and of Jesus’ own words: “Why are you afraid o you of little faith?”

There is a better way – not the way of fear: of resignation, compromise, denial, failure to see our own part. The better way is to redeem the time, by loving God and loving neighbor.

The times are evil; but you may redeem them. We are fearful but perfect love casts out fear. So awake, take off the blinders, clear your eyes and place your feet on this better path – the way of Jesus: loving God and loving neighbor, the way of joy and peace and justice, the way of the cross. This is the better way described by our prophet in the chapter just following our text: which I am going to read as our conclusion today:

[Isaiah 58: vss. 6-12

IN THE NAME OF GOD, OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER
AND SUSTAINER. AMEN