

December 14, 2008

The Third Sunday of Advent (Year B) - Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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A GARLAND INSTEAD OF ASHES

If you have ever been in mourning, then you know how hard mourning can be. Real mourning is an experience like being in exile. I'm not talking about something tamed and domesticated: one of the "stages of grief;" a normal part of life; something we get over and from which we move on. I'm talking about knowing the kind of loss that leads to great heaving sobs; the kind of loss that leaves a great big hole in our hearts that we know will never be filled, at least not in the same way or by the same person. Real mourning knows that the world will never be the same again. A favorite professor of mine used to say that the death of the tiniest Vietnamese child closes a window on reality that can never again be opened. Today he might substitute "Iraqi child" or "homeless child" for "Vietnamese." Mourning is a response to real loss.

Mourning is also a fairly solitary task, something that no one else can do for us. I once heard the experience of mourning as rather like being behind a glass wall. Our hearts are broken and our world seems changed. Yet all around us, people —our friends— all seem to us as though they are going about their lives as though nothing earth-shaking had happened. The glass wall is at once separating and also protective of us in a very tender time. It is as though we are in a different space somehow. Maybe —once in a while— someone can be behind that wall with us for a moment or two — someone who is also in mourning—but on the whole, mourning is a solitary spiritual task, however many real and true friends offer us a shoulder on which to cry. It is as though we are in exile until one day we wake up— and for no apparent reason — that wall is no longer there.

Sometimes our mourning also triggers other losses, losses that we have perhaps not even named or acknowledged to ourselves. I well remember how when a very good friend of mine died a few years ago, I was really not fit for human company. I think the technical term is that I was 'labile' - which is to say that I could feel weepy at the drop of a hat: television commercials, pictures of babies, bad news in the papers —anything could trigger my sense of loss. And even as I went through it (because mourning is more something we are 'in' than something we 'do') — even as I went through that time, I knew that I was mourning not only my friend, but a vision of my life that had not been fulfilled. I had been blessed with grace upon grace, only to see it all fall apart faster than the financial markets of the last few months and in many ways I became that cliché of a person who looked for love in all the wrong places. Perhaps the glass wall also protects those around us from the craziness that comes with deep and abiding loss.

The people of Israel to whom the prophet Isaiah brought words of comfort had returned from exile and face the task of some kind of reconstruction of their country. It was not how they remembered it, or how they had been taught by their parents to think of it and the hope of return had turned to yet another disappointment: loss upon loss. And God promises through the prophet that one day, and for no apparent reason, that glass wall will be lifted by sheer grace. *The Lord has anointed me...to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn...to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness in stead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit...* God reminds the people that they are not forgotten, however

bleak things may seem, and that one day that wall will be lifted for no apparent reason and they will know justice and mercy and deliverance. As St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, another community longing to know the fullness of redemption: *The One who calls you is faithful*. The One who calls you is faithful. And there we have the challenge of this life: putting our whole trust in God's grace and love — God's fidelity to us—when all is not well and when even if our exile or our mourning is over, the world can still seem filled more with brokenness than with the fullness of the glory of God.

The promise of God, of course, is the promise of Christmas and the birth of a child who will usher in an age of peace, the light to whom John testified, a birth in which the hopes and fears of all the years come together. Last week Noelle reminded us that there is nothing we can do to conjure the experience of grace for which we long, but also that there is nothing we can do to stop the grace of God being poured out and changing everything. You and I may or may not experience this grace, this renewal of life, on the night of December 24th and the twelve days of Christmas which follow. While we celebrate God's fidelity, our *experience* of God's fidelity frequently fails to match our church calendar, however wonderful and glorious and heartfelt our celebration. But the prophet reminds a disappointed people that reconstruction in the fullest sense will be theirs. And St. Paul reminds a later people filled with longing that the One who calls them is faithful. And our celebration of the birth of Christ offers us the same promise.

Anyone who has ever come through mourning and found that glass wall has melted away knows that the promise of grace is not empty and knows that no one really knows the hour or the day when it will happen. We simply know that it will happen, and will happen in God's good time. A cynic will point at all the evil that seems to hold sway in the world and ask 'where is your God?' and a person of faith who finds him or herself in the exile of mourning might ask the same question in times where we seem to be abandoned-- 'O Lord, where art thou?' But I can tell you that mourning does come to an end, and for me that was the beginning of reconstruction and new life, a slow awakening of capacity or availability for real love. I know how bleak things can seem in exile, but I also know that Christmas does come, that love conquers all and that the One who calls us is faithful. In mourning, in anxious times or when we simply long for justice to be made manifest in this world I urge you to put your whole trust in God's grace and love and watch for the first signs of grace when you are granted real connection with others. No wonder the prophet's image is one of marriage: *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has covered me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots...so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.*

Are you mourning, simply waiting, or brimming over with thanksgiving? Wherever you find yourself this day, I invite you to respond to the gospel asking grace that you and we may put our whole trust in God's grace and love and walk with confidence through whatever life brings in the days to come. In silence, let us pray...