

An Ancient Dreamer

From the Advent series: Songs of Liberation

Text: Isaiah 11:9; John 1:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is Advent again and so we march out those same familiar passages of scripture. They are wonderful passages; we celebrate the Christian Year thus annually. We come around the cycle and the themes surface once again, and there is a familiarity about those prophetic scriptures and gospel lessons. In this Advent season, we're going to be looking at the Songs of Liberation. Subsequently, we will be taking another look at Mary's marvelous "*Magnificat*," Zachariah's song of delight at the birth of John the Baptist, but today, "The Ancient Dreamer," the prophet Isaiah, who is representative of that prophetic vision that dreamed of a world other than it is, of a different human condition, of a transformed human society, of the kingdom of God, of Shalom on earth, of a totally transformed human situation. We hear the prophetic words, "From the stump of Jesse," seemingly just a dead stump, comes a sprout, and that sprout blossoms forth and becomes the king anointed with Spirit or a Christ, a Messiah, one who judges, not according to appearance or what people are saying, but according to truth, who advocates for justice, who has a concern for the poor. And not only is the whole social situation transformed, but nature itself is transformed. The wolf and the lamb lie down together and all of the nature red in tooth and claw is domesticated and docile in a beautiful, harmonious totality - the Shalom of God.

The Ancient Dreamer paints the picture and, representative as he was of that poor and oppressed people, it was the longing and the yearning for things to be different than they were. We're going to look at the Songs of Liberation once again this Advent season, but this morning I'm going to dump in your laps a problem. I want you to think about it with me in this Advent season. I'll indicate, perhaps, the direction in which I'm thinking, but what I really hope to accomplish this morning is the rather modest task of confronting you, making you aware, bringing to your consciousness a very serious problem, and it is this - the Songs of Liberation that fill the prophetic scriptures of the Hebrew tradition and the ballads of liberation that fill the Gospel, telling the story of the arrival of Jesus, those songs of liberation are the songs of an underdog people. That must be obvious. People in dire straits, people under oppression, people under systems of domination, people in poverty, disease, hopelessness are still human. There's

something in the human heart that cries out against that. There's that cry of the Old Testament, "How long, O Lord, how long?" And so, it's quite to be expected, and we would find emanating from Israel, a minor people, marginalized, just a pawn in the game of international power brokerage – it is rather obvious that that people in the situation of poverty and destitution into which Jesus was born, it was quite understandable that such a people should be marked by songs of liberation. They were underdogs.

Now, here's the problem for Advent. How do the Songs of Liberation emanating from underdogs get appropriated by top dogs?

We love this season. It's beautiful. We come into the sanctuary and there's something that touches us deeply - the music, the ritual, and so much about the celebration of the Advent-Christmas season is very dear to us. We read the scriptures. They are the prescribed ones, but fortunately, we don't really hear them, lest they ruin our celebration. Now, isn't it true that we sort of take Advent in our stride? We hear these songs of liberation, but we don't really want them to be realized, do we? Because if the songs of liberation, the ancient dreamer's dream, Mary's *Magnificat*, Zachariah's paeon of praise - if they were to be realized, our world would be turned upside down. There would be such a radical transformation of the human scene, that everything about our lives would be changed. It's one thing to sing that way when you're an underdog, but it would be foolhardy to sing that way when you're the top dog.

Do you hear me? That's easy enough, isn't it? How does a top dog connect his or her life to the yearning of the underdog?

Well, we've got a solution. We've pushed the dream out into the future, into the world beyond, and we, in the meantime, read these stories, these ballads, sing these songs, offer our prayers, and trust that nothing radical will happen until the end when God will fix it all. Because I think we're not really against God fixing it right, just not right away. Eventually, eventually, let's get everything straightened out, the Golden Age of the future. That way, we can read the passages, say our prayers, but carry on life pretty much business as usual. But you see what's happening? The biblical story isn't connecting with the reality of our lives. The biblical story has become a piece of our compartment labeled "Religion." But it is not in touch with the everyday reality of our life and profession and business, public life, society in general. And so we have a "Religious" compartment and it is not in connection with where we really live. So, maybe we have to look at those songs once again and revisit the scripture and see how it is that top dogs should respond to the longing of underdogs.

Last September we had a Jewish-Christian Dialogue when Rabbi Hartman came back to town, and the theme of his discussion with Father Richard John Neuhaus was carefully selected - "The Word of God and Interpretive Communities." That means that the Word of God always comes filtered through an interpretive community. That means that there is no bare naked Word of God out there in the

world. The only Word of God out in the world is the Word of God filtered through the human receiver. And then, underneath that title, "Possibilities for Self-Correction." That biblical tradition, that Word of God as it has come down to us through interpretive communities - what are the possibilities for self-correction?

Well, David Hartman gave the experience of the Jewish people which I think is very helpful. He said in the scriptures we have a couple of paradigms or models of the relationship of God to the people. The Exodus, the founding experience of Israel, was an experience where Israel was in bondage; they cried to God; God moved for deliverance, and they passively received the redemption of God: God's unilateral movement to redeem a people. That was the Exodus model, which was the shaper of the founding of the people Israel.

But, a little later, Moses led that people to the foot of Mount Sinai and they got the law of God and the covenant of God, and now we hear a little different tone. Now it's not just God acting unilaterally, but now God invites them into responsible covenant relationship: "I have borne you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will hear my voice and obey my command...." And that Sinai covenant is summarized in the Book of Deuteronomy where we have Moses' farewell sermons as he summarizes the experience, and what does he say in a climactic passage in the Book of Deuteronomy?

"Look, I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, that you may live."

Israel is confronted with a responsibility to respond to God, so there came that whole tradition in Israel of the responsibility of the leadership of the people, the rabbis, to implement the moral law of God, the active implementation of the moral law. When that was not implemented, when that moral law was not followed, the prophets rose up and condemned Israel and said, "You will be judged for this."

But, David Hartman said there was another stage. It happened in the centuries right around Jesus, Second Temple Judaism, the Talmudic period. Then the Jews made another move. Not only did they take responsibility for the implementation of the law as it was written, but they became the interpreters of the law. Why did they have to interpret the law? Well, the situation had changed. History moved on. There were new situations, new conditions.

They had to obey God, follow God, worship God in a whole new context, and so they developed the method of interpretation that not only said what the law said, but now they interpreted what the law meant. That was a significant move in the life of the Jewish people, whereas, David Hartman said, the rabbis, the biblical scholars became, as it were, the *creators* of the Word of God, never starting out with something brand new but, always working with that tradition, saying, "Now

in this new situation, this is what the Word means, thereby becoming an *interpretive* community.

But, the Jewish people still considered themselves to be in exile and the predominant, at least orthodox, opinion among the Jewish people was that they were scattered in exile waiting for the Messiah to come. We say that Jesus was the Messiah. But they say that Jesus was not the Messiah. Jesus could not be the Messiah, because, when Messiah comes, the world will be made right. And the world is still filled with war and violence and all the rest of it. Obviously, then, the Messiah has not come.

Well, we said the Messiah came, but he came in a little different way than we expected and he's going to come again and fix it up.

Now, we have the Jewish people and the Christian church both looking for the Messiah to come - we looking for a return, they looking for the first time, because the predominant Jewish mood was, if history is going to be changed, God is going to have to change it through God's anointed one, the sprout out of the stump of Jesse.

In the 19th century there were some secular Jews, not observant anymore, who said, "You know, we've really had enough of prayer and fasting. We've really had enough of waiting on God. Let's do something," and the Zionist movement was born. The Zionist movement was an innovative movement within Judaism in which the secular Jews for the first time took responsibility for history. They began to say it is not enough to pray and to say, "How long, O Lord, how long?" Let us roll up our sleeves and let us make it happen. The Zionist movement of the 19th century issued in the establishment of the Jewish homeland in the 20th century and there is Israel today, a reality.

Now, my question to you this Advent season is whether or not that secular Zionist movement within Judaism did not perhaps get it right, and that maybe the Christian church ought to take a lesson and begin to implement the kingdom of God here and now? Maybe we ought to be done with that "golden age" out in the future which God will make happen. Maybe we ought to begin to say, "Where in the world is the Spirit of God moving now, and how can we get in the flow of that Spirit to realize more and more the kingdom of God, here and now, right here and now, in this world, in this place?" Maybe in Advent we ought to catch ourselves up short and not say, "How long, O Lord, how long?" And, "O Lord, when will be the day of his appearing?" But maybe we ought to hear, for example, Micah in the text of a couple weeks ago, "*The Lord has showed you what is required of you and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*"

Maybe we ought to take seriously what we profess when we say the Word became flesh. Maybe we ought to get serious about the fact that God has embodied in human flesh the eternal intention of God - "In the beginning was the word and

the word was with God and the word became flesh and dwelt among us," and in the flesh of Jesus we have the embodiment of the intention of God. Maybe God is saying, when we say, "How long, O Lord," maybe God is saying, "That's my line! Why are you crying to me? Haven't I made it clear? Is it a problem that you don't understand? Is it a problem that the way is not there? What do you want further from me? Why aren't you doing something about it?"

My problem with celebrating Advent unreflectively, according to custom, delightful though it is, is that we endanger ourselves in becoming very hypocritical, because, you see, it seems to me that Advent prayers in the sanctuary or the chapel ought to be not, "O God, bring in the day of your kingdom," but rather, "O God, give me wisdom, discernment and courage to affect your kingdom here and now." Perhaps our prayer and our worship ought to be a time of waiting on the Lord to give us that inward strength and courage and boldness to begin to act according to the way that clearly God has called us to act.

And what would happen if songs of liberation began to be sung, not only by the underdogs, but by the top dogs? And is it possible that in our Western tradition we have already all kinds of things going for us that ought not to be seen as some secular developments, but perhaps as the beginning germination of the kingdom of God within the course of history? We could name a lot of things. How about the feminist movement, where a woman says, "Could you treat me as a human being, fully human? Could I be treated equally?" What about our growing understanding, as we have here, that sexual orientation is not a choice, but is a part of the vast diversity of God's creation? What would happen if you took into your arms one who had felt the sting of rejection and felt her salty tears as she knew for the first time she was included? Wouldn't it be the beginning of the kingdom of God? What about the dignity of the human person that we've come to appreciate in the West? What about the democratic process, what about the opportunity to worship God according to our conscience?

Those values are not just human values arrived at through secular speculation, but I believe they are the consequence of the impetus of the Spirit of God in the course of history. What if we got serious about taking those things seriously and making them applicable in ever-widening circles? What if we got concerned as top dogs to begin to implement the yearning of the underdogs of the world? Wouldn't that be something?

We don't have to throw our world away. We don't have to throw our freedoms away. We don't have to throw the economic miracle away; we don't have to throw our medical miracles away; we don't have to undo what we have done. What we have to do is to see that all that has been done has been done by grace and ought to be implemented more and more for more and more, and then, I believe the kingdom would be coming and then we would be less concerned about some golden age and less imperiling our soul with hypocrisy by praying, "Lord, when is

the day of Your appearing?" and we would start making something happen here and now, and maybe for the first time be honest at Advent.

There have been secular writers who have described political reality in marvelous terms that are somewhat comparable to the ancient dreamer, and people write them off. They call them Utopian. And when anyone comes up with a different idea of another world and the way it could be, they could easily be written off as Utopian. "Aaah, it's Utopia! Why don't you get in the real world? Get real!" You know what Utopia means from the Greek? Literally, no place. Utopia is no place, and the Messianic Age is no age. The Messianic Age and the ideal of Utopia is that critique of every moment of history and by God's grace and by God's Spirit, we are the people who have the resources and the power and the vision to make it happen. When will we begin to take responsibility for our world? There have been some interesting things written about the sextuplets as God's miracle. That's not God's miracle, that's a medical miracle and it has questionable qualities about it; it's a question of medical ethics, it's something that human beings ought to think about, wrestle with. God isn't going to answer that problem.

We need to stay out of the chapel and off our knees asking God to do what God asks *us* to do when He says, "Why don't you do what you ought to be doing, have enough knowledge to be doing, enough wisdom to be doing, if you would do it humbly, walking with your God, conscious that life is gift and you are charged with responsibility, but have access to the Spirit so that you could change your world?"

That is what I'd like you to think about this week.