

GOD'S PLAN TO REPAIR CREATION

ISAIAH 42:1-9; MATTHEW 3:1-12

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One preacher says God's will is to repair the creation, to make the human family and creation the way God intended it to be from the very beginning of time.

If you want to summarize the Bible that's not a bad job.

You could say the story of the Bible is precisely God's attempts to set things right, to get things back on track after going awry, after delusions of grandeur reared its hydra-shaped head under the apple tree.

That's who God is and that's who we are.

In this morning's Old Testament account we pick up the saga half way from Genesis to Revelation. Isaiah reminds the people exiled in Babylon who have been allowed to return to their homeland by Cyrus, King of Persia, Isaiah reminds them who they are.

Living in bondage for centuries the people had forgotten who they were.

Not hard to imagine. Sometimes, when we leave home for a new place, new sights and sounds and cultures we forget where we came from, we forget who our people are, we forget who we are. Thomas Swan, our beloved late organist/choirmaster had a saying before a large event or in a trying moment, "let us remember who we are," he would say.

Both of our sons are away at school. They were home for Christmas and New Year's.

When you are living in a boarding school in mid-coast Maine or in a university in metropolitan New York with other students from all over the world, with differing backgrounds and values and beliefs it is exhilarating to be away from home. It can also be a moment of deepening. An opportunity to explore, reaffirm your values.

That's why our visit to Cincinnati to see aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents was important this first Christmas when the boys were home. To be with our family. To tell the old stories. To observe the old rituals. To share the current challenges and journey of life with loved ones.

So Isaiah says to the people who have been in darkness and who are coming home to take possession of the land again, Isaiah says, "let us remember who we are."

We are children of the Creator of life; we are the ones to whom "ruah" – breath and spirit – has been given; we are people called into whole relationships with God and each other; we are called to be a light to the nations, to bring hope to the oppressed.

We are called to join God in repairing the creation.

So far, so good. Isaiah reminds the people who they are, reaffirms their mission.

But in revealing how God intends to fix a broken world – through a servant and not just a servant but a servant who suffers – Isaiah creates a stir.

A bruised reed? A dimly burning wick?

Strange way to repair the world's brokenness.

After getting knocked around for a couple of centuries Israel was in no mood to follow a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick.

At long last, after God heard the cries of the people and was ready to bring them out of horrible, mean-spirited Babylon how could God ask the people to follow anything less than a five star, military hero?

How was a frail, vulnerable servant going to do any good?

How indeed? Where there has been injustice, where you have power-hungry dictators in Babylon and Afghanistan you have to teach people a lesson and mete out justice.

When eastern Europe became the whipping post of Serbian bad boy Miroslav Milosevic, Kosovo the scene of atrocities, President Clinton persuaded NATO into finally giving Milosevic some of his own medicine. In 1999 we launched a massive bombing campaign against the Serbs for “humanitarian” purposes.

In the wake of September 11th most of this nation and other nations of the developed world have little question that our military response to the terrorists is the right response.

I use these examples because they give visceral insight into Israel’s hunger for reprisal.

But Biblical scholar Walter Wink sounds a different note. He says redemptive violence – when someone does violence to you and you are justified in doing violence to them – this myth of redemptive violence is not the strategy that finally wins the day.

Yes, parts of the Bible sanctions this kind of violence. Lex talionis.

An eye for an eye. But this is a throw back to pagan influences.¹

Rather, in Isaiah 42 a different viewpoint emerges.

A point of view that grows more prominent through the Hebrew experience.

A point of view that ultimately describes the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Why does God choose a dimly burning wick, a bent reed? One preacher says, I do not know. God’s thoughts are not my thoughts; God’s ways are not our ways. I do know this though, he says, when we call down God’s justice on the world, we assume it is justice for others and punishment for others.

The truth of the matter is we are all of us dimly burning wicks and bruised reeds and God chooses not to rain down wrath upon us. Rather God chooses to climb up on a cross and take wrath upon himself.

Robert Coles, the wonderful Harvard child psychiatrist, reflects three decades after Ruby Bridges – a 6 year old girl – initiated desegregation in New Orleans’ public schools.

Coles remembers it this way: for days that turned into weeks and weeks that turned into months, this child had to brave murderously heckling mobs, morning, noon and night...hurling threats and slurs and hysterical denunciations.

Federal marshals took her to school and brought her home. She attended school all by herself for a good part of a school year owing to a total boycott by white families. Her parents were sharecroppers trying to find a slightly better deal in the big city. They were unemployed, and like Ruby, faced threats each day.

Still Ruby and her parents persisted. Eventually, Ruby's teachers began to wonder about the ability of this child to bear such adversity – with so few mental, emotional, or material resources.

I regret to say, says Coles, I reassured those teachers that all was not as it seemed. That Ruby appeared strong, but would soon enough, show signs of psychological wear and tear. Perhaps she was denying her fears, her anxieties; perhaps her strange calm in the face of danger represented a “reaction formation” a convenient category we psychologists sometimes invoke.

Then “I was standing in the classroom, looking out the window, and I saw Ruby coming down the street, with federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there, shouting, as usual. A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time! She told one of the marshals she prays for those people, the ones in that mob, every night before she goes to sleep.”

When Coles asked Ruby about her concern and why she prayed for the hecklers she said cheerfully and matter-of-factly, “Yes, I do pray for them.” When he pressed her she said, “I go to church every Sunday, we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do.”

“They keep coming, saying the bad words, but my momma says they'll get tired after a while and stop coming. They'll stay home. The minister came to our house and he said the same thing, and not to worry and I don't. The minister said God is watching and He won't forget us because He never does. The minister says if I forgive the people and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and He'll be our protection.”

She stopped and seemed positive. Yet, I thought I felt some doubt, some uncertainty, says Coles. So I asked her if she believed the minister was on the right track. “Oh, yes,” she said; and then came a kind explanation for my benefit, the benighted, agnostic, Yankee visitor: “I'm sure God knows what's happening. He's got a lot to worry about; but there is bad trouble here, and He can't help but notice. He may not rush to do anything, not right away. But there will come a day, like we say in church.”ⁱⁱ

A bruised reed. A dimly burning wick. A little child shall lead them. What Isaiah points to and Matthew announces this morning is that despite the way we would go about repairing the world – with guns and armies and important people and force of strength – despite this God has God's own way of making things right again.

You can almost imagine God sitting up there, watching us do one another in, in various ways, ways that break God's heart. And you can imagine God saying it's got to be something they don't expect, something radically different, something that will get them to stop in their tracks and realize they've got to open their hearts and change their ways.

A 6 year old daughter of a share-cropper facing the entrenched wrath and bigotry of three centuries of racism with nothing more than her book-bag and Sunday School faith...God's ways are not our ways.

When you get down to it, most of us, in our heart of hearts have a quarrel with God. “We project onto God the way we wish God was, which is usually a version of ourselves,” says one theologian.

If we are athletic, God becomes a kind of cosmic football player.

If we’re sympathetic to the workers, God becomes a union organizer.

If we are political conservatives, God becomes the patron of down-home American family values. If we are ardent capitalists, God becomes a chamber of commerce advocate.

And when we want justice we want it now and we want it powerfully, and we are dissatisfied with the peculiar, seemingly ineffective, nonviolent ways God establishes justice. All we want is for God to be God the way we would be God if we were God.ⁱⁱⁱ

The good news today dear friends is this: God’s ways are not our ways, God’s thoughts our thoughts....

For a bruised reed God will not break and a dimly burning wick God will not extinguish.

I believe, just like Ruby, there will come a day. I believe God is keeping his eye fixed on us and on our situation in Afghanistan and in America and here in Buffalo, New York. I believe God will be our protection.

From old boy networks that presume to know the best way for our city and county to terrorists who stop at nothing to accomplish their twisted aims we live in the worst of times but also, I am bold to say this morning, the best of times.

You see, we have a choice. We can try to squeeze our version of God into a little box called “what I want and what I think”;

or we can open ourselves to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus and Ruby Bridges, the God of you and me, the God who calls us to join him – in ways we’d never dream of – to repair a broken world. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992); *The Power That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Wink explores the theme of the myth of redemptive violence in both books and offers Jesus’ “third way” alternative to violence.

ⁱⁱ Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987) 178.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, January 2002.