

Room for Righteousness

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“But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” -- 2 Peter 3:13

The text for this morning’s sermon comes from the little and little-known book in the New Testament called Second Peter, and it says this: “But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”

Isn’t that a beautiful image – an earth where righteousness is at home? How different such an earth would be from the one we all know and fret over. The image sounds a bit like Disneyland, “the happiest place on earth” according to its marketers. According to Second Peter, the day is coming when the whole earth, and not just theme parks in Anaheim or Orlando, will be a magical kingdom where righteousness is at home.

At Disney, it’s magic; in Richmond Heights, it’s faith, and there’s nothing magical about it. It’s faith, and not expensive tickets for rides and exhibits and eats, that turns righteousness from a future hope into a present reality. It’s faith and it’s works – lots and lots of hard, patient, faith-filled, faith-grounded, and faith-driven work. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” we pray every Sunday in the words of Jesus, “on earth as it is in heaven.” God’s realm on earth -- that’s our hope, that’s our calling, and that’s our mission. Maybe we should make that our mission statement: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

And because we know that that kingdom has not come and because we know that God’s will is only occasionally – perhaps rarely – done on earth, we wait. We wait with patience and, in Paul’s words, “with eager longing” for the day when the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, as Isaiah puts it, “as the waters cover the sea.”

That’s the dominant image of Advent – the day that is to come, that both is and is not yet with us. We do have knowledge of God; we know what righteousness looks like. If we didn’t, none of us would be here this morning. Churches wouldn’t exist, synagogues wouldn’t exist, mosques and temples wouldn’t exist, religion wouldn’t exist.

Righteousness, and the desire for it, is one of the powerful impulses in humans that give rise to religion – the other two being the fear of death and the attempt to control our physical environment. From as early as our boar-spearing days, we humans have always been aware of the gap between the reality that we live with and the reality that we know can and should exist, and ever since we brought fire inside the cave, we’ve been working toward that latter reality.

At some point, we realized that the longing for that not-yet reality is a gift from outside ourselves, and in time we called the giver God, so that the gap we’re aware of – or at least some of us are aware of – is the gap between the reality we have made for ourselves and the reality God wishes for us – God’s will, in other words. The awareness of that gap is what lies behind Jesus’s words about God’s kingdom coming to earth and God’s will being done among us. Like all great religious leaders, Jesus was keenly aware of that gap, of what gives rise to it and how it can be bridged, and the name he gave to the bridge was righteousness.

And so that’s the tension we Christians live with in this season of Advent – the

future that God intends versus the reality in which we live. And in this jolliest of seasons by secular lights, this tension is completely ignored by retailers and the purveyors of manufactured holiday cheer. For those for whom this, rather than the twelve days after Christmas is the Christmas season, tension, waiting, and unrealized hopes are the very last things you want people thinking about. This is the season of answered “Dear Santa” letters; this is the season of having, of getting, of realizing -- “the most wonderful time of the year” as Andy Williams reminds us from every shopping mall speaker.

So we Christians, not wanting to be the season’s wet blankets, downplay the more sombre tones of Advent or ignore them altogether. Who wants to talk about the world to come when there’s so much fun to be had in this one? And Rudolph and Dancer and Prancer are a whole lot pleasanter to think about than the heavens melting at the final judgment.

I get that, and I love the beauty and sentiment and even some of the sentimentality of this season. I’ll never forget my first Christmas Eve here, when I stepped out onto the porch after saying good-bye to everyone who’d come to the early service, and discovered that it had been snowing quite heavily while we’d been in church. The wind had been blowing as well, and snow covered everything: the ground, the cars, the branches on the trees, the rooftops. The wind had died down, the snow clouds had passed, and the snow glistening in the moonlight was as magical as anything manufactured by Disney or produced on lithograph by Currier and Ives.

And then the rest of reality kicked in. I cleared the snow off my car and headed toward Highland Heights, where Gail and Frank Yusko had kindly invited me to join them for their annual holiday supper party. In those days, I was still trying to learn my way around the eastern suburbs of Cleveland, and not many of us had GPS systems. And although I had a perfectly good map with me, its usefulness was seriously compromised because all the street signs had been covered by that beautiful blowing snow. Only the occasional sign had enough writing still visible to tell me where I was, and I can remember pulling off Highland Road into the parking lot of DiStefano’s and counting the number of streets on my map between Bishop and Miner roads. And when I finally found Kenarden Drive, not a single house number was visible on the snow-covered mailboxes.

I did finally get there, mainly by looking at which house had the most cars in the driveway and the most lights on, and that’s the way life often is: a mixture of the beautiful and the aggravating. And that’s the way of Advent for people who take Christianity seriously. We live in two worlds simultaneously – the world that is, and the world that is to come – and the reality of both of those worlds holds our lives in tension. Like the writer of Second Peter, we know that things will have to change dramatically for this world to be a place where righteousness is at home. With much of the Middle East a smoking war zone, with the thousands suffering in Africa from Ebola, and with whites having declared open season on blacks in this country because of the way we’ve written our gun laws, righteousness right now is very often the exception rather than the rule.

But we do not lose faith and we do not lose hope because we have not lost God. Our trust in God is the foundation of our hope and gives shape to our faith. Our knowledge of the story of God’s activity in the world, preserved for us in the pages of Scripture and the tradition of the church, helps us make sense of the chaos and confusion. The story of Jesus is the story of one person struggling to live a life supremely faithful to that reality seen only in passing, which he called the realm of God. He said that realm is within us and among us. He compared it to a mustard seed, which is tiny in itself, but which can grow into a large bush. Something like that needs room to grow, and Jesus knew that not everyone would put in the effort to provide that room for that growth within themselves.

He also compared that realm to a farmer who sowed seeds in a field, and the weeds of care grew up and choked the life out of the seedlings of the realm. The realm of God is powerful, to be sure, but it's also very fragile, and it requires loving care and attention if it's to survive in our demanding and cluttered world.

So the church, by creating this season of Advent, asks us to create room in our lives – in those very busy schedules that constitute our lives – for righteousness. Righteousness needs room, but like the realm of God, it never forces its way in. Like Jesus, righteousness stands at the door of our heart and knocks; it doesn't kick the door in. And it doesn't because righteousness is a kind of love, and love that forces itself in isn't love at all. If you want to be sure of a welcome, you don't crash a party. You may not be invited, but if you are, you'll know that you're wanted, and isn't that really what parties are for – to remind us that we're wanted? Isn't that why the father threw a party when the prodigal returned? And didn't that welcome constitute the father's righteousness?

I want to close this morning, in this season of parties and gatherings and open-houses, by thanking, publicly and posthumously, one of the people who made room for righteousness in a place where the pursuit of self-interest was the coin of the realm.

Some of you will remember meeting the late Peter Gomes in Hartford, Connecticut, when Peter spoke at the fiftieth General Synod of our denomination in the summer of 2007. Not only was Peter one of the great preachers of our generation, but he was also a legendary host. The parties he threw at Sparks House, his official residence in Cambridge, were famous from New York to Maine. Whether they were for the staff in The Memorial Church, the University Choir at Christmas time, or for the town and gown at commencement, Peter's parties were the stuff of society pages.

Peter was a textbook extrovert and a social animal to his core, so throwing a notable party came naturally to him. But what most people didn't realize was that Peter was also exercising the ancient Christian practice of hospitality. Beneath their lah-dee-dah hats-and-lace-gloves pretension, Peter's parties were grounded in a welcome and a warmth and an inclusiveness that emanated from the host himself, who rarely got to enjoy his own parties. He stood at the door of his house or at the entrance of his drive and he welcomed and bade farewell to every single guest. Peter made sure that every person who came to his house knew that they were valued and wanted, because he realized, very early in his career there, that while individuals might love Harvard, Harvard rarely loved individuals in return.

And so, as the most visible Christian in that competitive, meritocratic, and profoundly isolating place, Peter took it upon himself to invite people from all walks of life and by the hundreds into his home every academic year, for almost any reason, to remind them that they mattered. He literally spent a fortune throwing parties and teas and dinners in his forty-one years at Harvard, and he died virtually broke. And at his memorial service, all those party-goers from across the decades filled the church he served to overflowing, weeping with sadness and gratitude for a man who preached the gospel and made them feel welcome.

Righteousness, friends, takes many forms, including a good party. It is, after all, to a heavenly banquet that the book of Revelation tells us that we are all invited. Why not, in this Advent season, make a little more room for righteousness by bringing a little heaven to earth with a welcoming banquet of your own?