

FROM THE MINISTER'S DESK:

The question of how God's promises are fulfilled is one that comes up during the season of Advent (from the latin *adventus*, which implies a Royal 'coming', as in the French *a venir*) In the book of Samuel, the prophet Nathan receives a message for King David. "The Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.....I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." (2 Samuel 7:11- 16)

The most obvious meaning of this promise is that, unlike other human dynasties (the Tudors, the Stuarts, the house of Windsor etc.) the house of David would not come to an end ie. there would always be a biological descendant of David on the throne of Israel. The possibility of interpreting the promise this way, however, ran into major difficulties with the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. About 400 year after King David's death, we read in the Book of Kings that the sons of King Zedekiah were all executed before they tore out his eyes and hauled him off to Babylon. The end of the biological dynasty of David created a theological crisis. Had God broken His promises to King David and to Israel? Listen to these poignant lines from Psalm 89:

I [the LORD] will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David.
His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun.
But now [says the Psalmist] you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust.
You have removed the scepter from his hand, and hurled his throne to the ground.

The course of events raised questions about the reliability of God's promise. Was there perhaps some other way in which it could be interpreted so that the promise could be fulfilled and God's honour vindicated?

How do you tell if a promise has been kept when its fulfillment is not exactly what was originally anticipated? Do the answers to such questions not lie largely in the eye of the beholder? Such judgments are matters of interpretation and faith – especially as they relate to the promises of God which cannot be arbitrated by any court for "breach of contract".

David had been the exemplary King of Israel; his reign the golden age of Israel's history, due in part to his military ability, charisma, popularity but also his rectitude and loyalty to Yahweh. Not only had he been successful militarily, he was the psalmist poet, "the man after God's own heart". If the "house of David" did not mean actual biological descent, what else might it mean? Descendants from David's tribe of Judah? Or might there be some sort of metaphorical or spiritual succession? In the face of ongoing political disappointment, a popular consensus began to emerge that God would intervene directly and supernaturally to fulfill his promise to David by anointing a proper successor. The world Messiah (m^eshiach) means "anointed One". Expectation grew that God would come back into Israel's history by anointing a successor to David who would bring Israel's long exile to an end, rebuild the temple and usher in the "messianic age" - the Peaceable Kingdom announced by the prophets.

Though there were a variety of scripts and considerable differences of opinion about the details of exactly “God’s coming” in the person of the Messiah would look, there was a broad expectation within the community of the faithful that the long period of exile would come to an end. God would “restore Israel” in the person of a Messiah. John the Baptist preached a message of repentance to prepare the nation for the coming Messiah. This popular expectation is what fuelled the steady stream of messianic candidates for the throne of David from before the time of Jesus to the revolt against the Romans by Simon bar Kokhba, a hundred years after him. Jesus was one of many who either claimed (or whose disciples claimed on their behalf) Messianic status – for which he suffered the usual Roman punishment. Crucifixion amounted to public proof that this candidate was NOT THE MESSIAH. Caesar remained on the throne.

This is the historical context in Luke’s gospel of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary, “[The son you bear] will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The question arises, “Was the birth of Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise to King David of a dynasty that would have no end?” Whether or not such an interpretation of God’s promise to David is legitimate has long been a point of contention between Jews and Christians. The paradox of Jesus’ ministry is this: that, in claiming to herald the fulfillment of Israel’s hope, he redefined it away from popular political expectations. In fact, Jesus warned that if people persisted in their nationalist revolt against Rome that they would eventually be crushed and that the wrath of Rome would amount to the judgment of God. Entering God’s kingdom involved taking different path. He redirected people attention away from the horizon of history to the present immediacy of a “Kingdom” already in their midst if they had eyes to see and ears to hear it.

But the Kingdom that Jesus preached about was not the sort of Kingdom, which many Jews anticipated. It puzzled Pilate too. What sort of Kingdom is it that is not defined by political sovereignty over earthly territory? For someone looking for THAT sort of Kingdom, the establishment of the State of Israel looks more like a proper fulfillment of God’s promises to David. But this, too, remains a matter of faith. Where is the righteous King and the Peaceable Kingdom He is supposed to usher in? Rather than world peace, the empirical evidence points in the opposite direction. How does this represent fulfillment of God’s ancient promise?

Such identifications depend on faith. Whether or not faith is rationally justified is a different sort of question than solving a problem in algebra. Perhaps God’s promises generate multiple fulfillments – and in ways that keep surprising the people of God in every generation. We are left to wonder and to ponder the providential mystery of how Jesus and Israel are related to the prophetic vision of the “Peaceable Kingdom” that we read every year at this time in the Book of Isaiah. In this season of Advent may we all be open to the surprising gift of God’s presence, which breaks into our world and comes into our midst in ever new ways. We believe that the One who has come will come again. May our hearts and minds, our eyes and our ears be opened to that coming in whatever forms it takes. Welcome to Advent.

From the ^{STUDENT} Minister's ~~Desk~~-Table

The Facebook status of a friend of mine the other day said "I was only awake for an hour of daylight today. Clearly there aren't enough hours in the day." Clearly. Here is a guy who knows what it's like to work nights, to go (sometimes) days at a time without being awake before noon. He goes into work at supper time and is out before breakfast. This is the challenge of working nights. But even he has noticed that something is different. It used to be a few short months ago that he would come out of work and feel the warmth of the sunrise on his face. Or that he would go into work when the sun was still up during those long July evenings and night would never exist. Those times are long gone now, replaced instead with cold lonely mornings and bitter empty nights. He longs for the return of summer and the sun because something in him is wired to seek the light.

Call it biology or chemistry, call it emotionalism or faith - but something in us seeks lights. People are not built to be nocturnal. We don't have ears like a bat to move around in the pitch black, or eyes like a hawk to detect the faintest movement in the blackest night. As human beings we share less in common with nocturnal animals and more in common with flowering plants. In elementary school we planted bean seeds to watch them sprout, but then a funny thing happened. They didn't grow straight up but bent and contorted themselves. They were following the light source. Their bodies, though just days old, knew how to stretch and strain for just a little bit more sunlight. It's built into every fibre of their DNA; "seek the sun".

We aren't so different from those beans. Our innermost being waits for daylight to break so we can bask in sunlight. Our bodies choose to sleep when it is dark because aren't made for nighttime. We are, as people, called to be in relationship with the sun. You see where I'm going with this right? The prophet Isaiah wrote "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined." Night is about to break, he said. The long cold lonely night is almost over. If you look to the East you can see the

radiance of colour cutting through the blackness. That's why we celebrate Christmas when we do. Jesus was probably not a Capricorn - but we celebrate the end of a long dark winter night.

Advent, in case you weren't at the workshops, comes from the Latin for 'coming'. It is the time of the Church year when we both celebrate the arrival of the Christ-Child but look forward to His return as the triumphal King. It's a season of dawn. A new year is on the horizon in a couple of weeks, but a new Church year is already underway. The long night is over. A son is coming into the world again and he will be a brilliant light.

In the days before the lectionary, the season of advent used to be a time when the Church would turn to the book of Revelation. Here is a book that paints a picture of what this advent, this coming, will look like. It's a time of destruction and upheaval, but it is a book with a happy ending. Everything is made right in the world, justice prevails, and then John writes these words: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. ... And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

Amen

Jared Miller
Student Minister

From the ^{Student} Minister's ~~Desk~~ ^{Table}

Christians like to be busy. We live and die by the promise of grace by faith alone, but we pack our calendars as tight as they can be, figuring we need to do something. It's the old "Protestant Work Ethic" still chugging along. This kind of business isn't just a south shore thing though. All of us are inflicted with the need to be busy and produce results. That's what the world tells us is the measure of success. Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, realized early on in ministry that the Church couldn't hope to compete with the day timer so instead of fighting a losing battle, he bought one himself and every afternoon blocked off a three-hour period labelled simply "God." If someone wanted to make an appointment, Peterson was busy then. He had a prior appointment. It's Martin Luther, the protestant himself that allegedly spent an hour a day in prayer – except when he was busiest. On those days he spent three. Protestants like to be busy.

I know what I'm talking about here. I've been surrounded by this attitude my whole life. I need it in some regard because my natural inclination is to be lazy. But I've been surrounded by these people my whole life. I come from a family of go-getters. My mother, father, and sister are all very driven people. Perfectionists. Our family never stopped going. We were always running off to do something or going somewhere for some reason or other. My mother was the Minister

of Music at my home church so even on Sundays we were running around frantically trying to get everything in order for what was supposed to be a day of rest. We just never stopped.

Except for those two weeks in July when we would cram into the family car and drive from Nova Scotia to Kingston, Ontario – to the family cottage for summer vacation. There, everything seemed to stop. We lounged, ate long meals, basked in the August sun. We paused our creation and engaged – for a time – in re-creation. Looking back, I’m thankful for those two weeks because it meant that we got a chance to recharge our batteries for another go at the world. But I wonder, thanks to the power of hindsight, if we missed the real lesson in all those days of vacation. Stopping may well have saved the life (or at least the health and sanity) of my family, but is that the only lesson here? Do we stop once a year just to recharge? Or do we only sleep the few hours a night we *absolutely* need to function the next day? No. We like to sleep as long as we can. It feels good to get nine solid hours every night. We feel refreshed and reinvigorated. It’s not just a once in a blue moon activity – It’s a regular practice. Without the gift of rest our bodies collapse, wither and will die. It’s the same with our spiritual bodies. Our spirits need rest regularly or they start to show their age.

The writer of Ecclesiastes (*Qoheleth*) was a wise man. He’d run up against the problem of time before. Here was a man who, by his own admittance, had tried to do everything possible to achieve a lasting happiness. It was only at the end of things that he realized all he needed all along was God. But in the middle of his book on wisdom he includes a list that most of us know as a Classic Rock song. “There is a time and place for everything in the universe.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) An organizational principle? My family would love that! A place for everything and everything in its place, right? But look at the second part of the list that follows. The list moves from activities like birth and death, planting and sowing, killing and healing, tearing and building, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing to a much more laid back second part. The second part could be read like this: “There is a time to shovel gravel and a time to skip stones on the lake. There is a time to take on new tasks and a time to say – that’s enough for me. There is a time to grab opportunities and a time to let someone else take over. There is a time to keep appointments and a time to clear your schedule. There is a time to be at work and there is a time to make crafts with your children. There is a time to concentrate and a time for idle chitchat. There is a time to debate and a time to go on dates. There is a time to fight, and a time to be with those closest to you.” (3:5-8) The teacher knows that there is value in taking a break from things – in resting from creation to take part in some much needed re-creation. Can we learn from the Teacher? Is there a time for everything *except* stopping? I think there is a value in saying “no” to things. There are lessons to be learned, even on vacation.

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