

Exile Decisions

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
Preached January 20, 2008

I.

Neither of the lessons just read, one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, are proof texts for what I am about to preach.

I will not be able to use one, nor the other, to prove what I would like to convey. Neither of these texts is, in fact, relevant to my topic.

When we hear a reading of scripture, we are hearing echoes of other worlds, other times, other places, other cultures, other people, other contexts, and other concerns.

In hearing the “otherness” of these texts, we are barred from simply appropriating them to support our arguments, bound by our familiar time and place and context. Yet, so often, this becomes the very strategy used by those of us who are preachers to convince ourselves and others that we are in the right, on the right, and that we *have* the right to invoke God in support of our ideological biases.

As Simone Weil wrote, “God must be hidden.”

In my own words, God’s hiddenness, God’s otherness, is God’s *holiness*.

That is, God’s concerns are ultimately *other* than our concerns.

God’s view is always larger and more radical than our view.

God’s possibilities always trump our limitations.

God’s love always consumes our love.

When we try to compare the light in us to the light in God, it is like holding up a match to the sun.

All of it is fire, but while the match sheds light on our hand and face, the sun illuminates the worlds.

This grandeur, this inestimable difference of scale, is God’s holiness.

If what I have said so far comes anywhere close to scratching the anvil of truth as if with a chewed fingernail, then what is left to say? What is left to do?

If God’s truth is more grandly *other* than anything we can imagine, why go on?

Because we *must* go on. We must go on, we must say more, we must do more, because we, who are, as Psalm 8 tells it, “slightly less than angels,” must live in this world, with its harsh and beautiful and dull realities, with its contingencies and vicissitudes, with its challenges and prospects, with its curses and its blessings.

And we do this, by faith, with the assurance that, in God’s otherness, God’s holiness, the Creator has the capacity to love the creation beyond measure.

Gifted with abundant life, and trusted to be God's partners in creation, we are free - even as God is free - to live, to love, to choose, to rejoice, to suffer.

II.

I preach today, as I do on this Sunday every year, on the importance, in our day and age, of reproductive freedom, reproductive choice, and the need for our society to respect the moral agency of women.

Tuesday is the anniversary of the historic Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision which, on January 22, 1973, made it legal for a woman to choose to have an abortion.

To tell the truth, I do not look forward to preaching this sermon. It's not an easy one.

For me, Reproductive Freedom is a concern that seems to keep choosing me.

As I consider all of the crucial issues of the day, from global warming to unsuccessful preemptive wars to abject poverty to AIDS education, and so on, I do not think of Reproductive Freedom as any more worthy of my attention.

In fact, some of these seem to be more urgent and global than the one that keeps falling in my lap.

I am tempted to say that this is not a personal or family issue for me, by which I would mean that I have never been party to or aware of a decision within my family, immediate or extended, to terminate a pregnancy.

But it *is* a personal and family decision for me, and for all of us, because Reproductive Freedom means not only the right for women to choose an abortion. It means much more.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose day we celebrate tomorrow, in his 1966 speech accepting the Planned Parenthood Federation of America Margaret Sanger Award, lauded "[family] planning in our society that enriches life and guarantees the right to exist in freedom and dignity."

No, it is not the most popular or positive issue on which to take a stand.

But sometimes we have a sense, living in relationship to God, who is Holy and Other, that God's Spirit has in mind for us something beyond that which we would have cooked up on our own, something in our very bones, hatched when and by whom, we only venture to say.

We proceed humbly, and with love as our intention, seeking the blessing of an expanded worldview and a renewed purpose.

III.

To be honest, I balked when I looked at the scriptures offered by the lectionary for today.

I balked not only because the texts were irrelevant to what I wanted to say.

I also balked because the passage from Isaiah is one of those to which certain biblically-oriented persons are wont to point to prove that the Bible's anthropology holds that a person is a person in the womb.

"The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me."

Perhaps it would have been more prudent to avoid this text, to avoid stumbling into the view that our inherent worth and purpose is given to us by God in the womb.

On the other hand, maybe our work of engaging a text is not simply to prove something we already believe, to justify our beloved prejudices, but to know something about, to receive something new from, the loving God who, in his/her otherness does not simply exist to "baptize our cherished ideologies," but to move us, together, as a church, as a world, to a future as yet unimagined.

In other words, what I am suggesting is that reading a text is a dynamic process - difficult, engaging, at times exasperating, hopefully revealing. As I've engaged this text over the past week, I offer these not-altogether-connected reflections upon our concern at hand, the concern for Reproductive Freedom:

1. In this passage, Isaiah is speaking to his people in exile, separated from their land, their temple, many of their kin, and from their God. In this text, he is attempting to establish his authority as a prophet who can articulate a future not yet imagined. "This is not something I just made up," he argues, "It seems that God gave me a purpose before I was born." This text is not a biological or anthropological description of when human life begins, but a reflective poetic justification for the prophet's authority.
2. In exile, the people to whom Isaiah speaks find themselves in conditions that are less than adequate to provide abundant life. Exiled from the land they know, the resources they control, the means of healthy existence, Israel does the best they can with what they have. They long to be restored to land and people and health, and in their longing they survive and wait and, with the help of the prophet, imagine new possibilities. Their challenge is to trust that, even in exile, God has not abandoned them as their partner, but will restore that which has been lost.

3. In using this passage to defend the pre-born life of the prophet, another person is overlooked - the one to whom the womb belongs. Implicit in the text is the prophet's mother. Given what we know of midwife practices, miscarriage and infant mortality rates of the time, the prophet was likely not her only pregnancy, though he was probably a lucky survivor. While the prophet, reflecting later, poetically intones an intrauterine God-naming, it was likely his mother who named him. The prophet, named by his mother, *later* understands himself to have been named by God. The mother's pregnancy, her nurture, in fact the milk from her breasts, is *later* interpreted as the means by which God has raised up this prophet for his noble purpose.
4. The meaning of the larger passage to which this phrase belongs is that God is about the business of doing something much larger than restore Israel, here called "Jacob," to God's favor. Verse 6: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Thus my point that this text is irrelevant to the point I want to make and also irrelevant to the person who wants to use this as a proof-text regarding when life begins.

IV.

One of the reasons this is important to us, members of First Congregational Church, citizens of Colorado, in 2008, is that a ballot measure has been proposed to amend the 2nd article of the constitution of the state of Colorado to expand the definition of "person" to (quote) "include any human being from the moment of fertilization." I acknowledge that there are some people, many of whom are Christian, who believe this to be true.

But the implication of this belief is that women should be required, regardless of the effect of a pregnancy on their personal health and well-being, and regardless of their own moral conscience, to carry every pregnancy to term because the fetus which they carry is every bit as much a "person" as they are.

The definition of the beginning of a human life is by no means established by scripture nor by science.

It is still, largely, a matter of *belief*.

In our society, differences of religious beliefs are safeguarded by the First Amendment, which guarantees religious freedom: (quote) "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

To amend the Colorado constitution to define a person at fertilization is to foist a minority religious belief upon all citizens, thereby prohibiting the free exercise of religion by a majority of its citizens.

In my opinion, regardless of the nuances of our beliefs on the subject of reproductive choice, we must not stand for this.

Among other fallacies, this effort flies in the face of our Protestant Reformation roots, a movement which insisted that the free conscience of individuals is paramount to what it means to be a person, free and responsible in relationship to God.

If there are women in our lives whom we love, we cannot stand for this, cannot willingly or passively allow the narrow agendas of some do violence to women, endowed with the biological and moral responsibility for bearing human life into the world.

If we believe in the God of the Bible, who sides with the widow, the orphan, the alien, the poor, the despised, the prostitutes, the destitute, the bereft, and who does not say, once and for all, when human life begins, but does endow human beings with the moral capacity to make choices with regard to our own destiny, and trusts us to make those decisions and to take responsibility for them, we cannot stand for this.

The religious right has successfully convinced the American public to believe that to be religious is to be anti-choice.

The fact is that a great majority of Americans, including a majority of Christians, believe that reproductive decisions should be left to individuals, and that a woman should be trusted and allowed to make decisions on behalf of her own well-being.

We as Christians should be leaders in providing women with compassionate and comprehensive resources so that informed choices are truly available.

We should be advocates for comprehensive sexuality education, proven to be one of the sure ways to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies.

We should support making contraception available, providing individuals the means to control their fertility for the well-being of themselves and society.

We should be preaching that sexuality is a gift, not only because it provides the means by which we give birth to the next generation, but because, aside from procreation, sex can be a beautiful and loving experience of the body.

And yes, we should understand ourselves as ordained by God to do all of this, never arrogantly, but always trusting that the picture is bigger than any of us can fit into our imaginations, remembering that exile decisions are always difficult, but that the God of Isaiah, our God, promises restoration and health, wholeness and abundant life, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. Amen.