

A Work in Progress  
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November 9, 2008

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I.

We the people are a work in progress.

We the people are not perfectly complete.

Nor are we hopelessly broken.

We are a work in progress.

We live our lives in a creative tension that is as old and elemental as the universe itself.

And yet in every day and in every age, the work that we have to do is unique to the challenges we face together.

Our work involves not so much the tension between good and evil, those cosmic forces largely out of our control.

Rather, our work is concerned with the tension between hope and fear.

In every moment, within our control is the possibility of embracing hope.

And in every moment, an equally potent possibility is the choice to don the mantle of fear.

Our mothers and father in the faith have faced the same tensions, the same possibilities, the same choices.

As we reflect upon the history of the church and upon the histories of societies, we perceive moments when one then the other of these two powerful influences seemed to hold sway.

And as we reflect upon the scriptures, the founding documents of our identity as a people, we perceive the same kinds of alternating moments.

Our ancestors were wooed alternately by the God of hope and the God of fear and so are we.

If we grow to trust that scripture is in some wise true, it will not be because we find it to be perfect, but because we will find it to be honest.

On this Sunday following election day, we pause to reflect upon this choice, the choice between hope and fear.

The choice between hope and fear does not so much mark an intellectual assent to one worldview over another.

Rather, the choice between hope and fear is a choice made by faith and it is a choice, once made, that affects not merely opinions but indeed the way we lead our lives.

For today is not only the Sunday following election day in the United States of America.

It is also this time of year in the Christian calendar, when people of the faith are called upon to anticipate what is called Christ the King, or more inclusively, Reign of Christ, Sunday.

Lectionary texts at this time of year describe the eschaton, the end of the world as we know it, the coming of the kingdom, the future toward which God is leading all of creation.

And the truth we affirm is that even now we can see dim sparks of the goal toward which we run.

It will be a new day in which... God is sovereign over all human powers and pretensions to power.

A new day in which a kingdom marked by just relationships prevails over empire.

A new day in which God's free gift of grace to all humanity and all creation puts to shame moralistic judgments that divide people their bodies, their neighbors, and from the earth.

II.

Early in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus talks about the kingdom in the present tense.

He says over and over again, "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

More than once, he describes the kingdom of God as a big party to which are invited the prodigals, the bums, the prostitutes, that is, all of the folks we would consider the least deserving.

In chapter 25, Jesus' rhetoric changes.

His life on earth is coming to an end.

Soon the plot to kill Jesus will unfold.

And so Jesus begins the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids with "The kingdom of heaven will be like this."

And he tells the story of another big party, a wedding banquet.

When we hear a parable of Jesus, we must be prepared for the variety of associations our mind will make.

But we also need to focus upon what appears to be the affect the parable is trying to have on us.

Hope and fear will color our reading of scripture as much they color the ways we interpret all aspects of our lives.

In reading this parable, if we assume a lens of fear, we might fixate on the exclusion of five bridesmaids.

If we do this, we will either dismiss Jesus' story as another example of the judgmental God we want to jettison.

Or we will create a hermeneutical framework to assure that we are included among those who enter the wedding feast.

In so doing, we are almost required to describe an “other,” those who are not who we are and therefore those who will be left in the dark. However, if we assume a lens of hope, we might trust that a message, humbling and helpful, is addressed to all the people, and even to us. The message of hope is Good News because it teaches us something about how to live and it moves us beyond our entrenched thinking and doing toward new ideas and new actions.

Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Amazing that the dilemma in the parable is one familiar to us today - not enough oil!

Five foolish ones took no oil for their lamps.

Apparently they assumed that, if darkness fell, they could get lamp oil from a vendor.

Five wise ones brought oil for their lamps.

They were preparing for a delay.

A delay in the arrival of the bridegroom was exactly the reality in which Matthew and his community were living.

There was an expectation that Jesus would return and that the world would change, in an instant, for the better.

The oppressed would be justified and the oppressors would get a swift dose of humility.

When Christ’s return was delayed, Matthew counseled his community on how to wait.

“Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

It wasn’t that the bridesmaids were good and bad.

They were foolish and wise.

The foolish were not prepared for the delay and when the darkness fell, they became desperate and ran off into the night in search of oil.

Somehow the wise knew that there could be a delay, but they did not despair.

Instead, they prepared.

When night fell, they had what they needed to kindle light in the midst of the gathering darkness.

III.

This is a parable told by Jesus to his disciples as he entered his final days. This is a parable told by Matthew to his community as they huddled against the threat of a powerful Roman Empire.

This is a parable told and retold by preachers and teachers to the church as we face our own dark days.

The arrival of God’s new day has been delayed.

How then shall we live?  
With hope, prepared to kindle light in the darkness.  
The arrival of prosperity for the poor has been delayed.  
How then shall we live?  
With hope, prepared to act on behalf of the least.  
The arrival of accessible health care has been delayed.  
How then shall we live?  
With hope, prepared to speak and act on behalf of those who need care.  
The arrival of the end of war has been delayed.  
How then shall we live?  
With hope, prepared to build a just and lasting peace.  
The arrival of a true spirit of unity and collaboration has been delayed.  
How then shall we live?  
With hope, prepared to reach out to ones we once regarded as enemies,  
prepared to listen and prepared to speak, prepared to trust and prepared  
to act.

#### IV.

This past week a remarkable thing happened.  
Americans elected as president the first African-American.  
That fact alone is reason to hope for a better world.  
That fact alone is reason to believe that we the people are a work in  
progress, with the accent on progress.  
And who would have thought 8 years ago, or even 4 years ago, as the  
Religious Right dominated the tone and direction of American politics,  
that our next president would belong to the United Church of Christ.

The speeches, not only the victory speech of Barack Obama, but the  
concession speech of John McCain, had in them a new sense of hope and  
of urgency.  
On Tuesday night, John McCain encouraged Americans “not to despair of  
our present difficulties.”  
His speech that night was filled with a spirit of peacemaking and the need  
for unity and cooperation.  
Would that our election process had allowed John McCain to share that  
spirit throughout the course of his campaign.  
And McCain’s words presaged the hope conveyed in Barack Obama’s  
extraordinary speech later that evening.  
I was particularly refreshed by the rhetoric of humility, a marked  
difference from the victory speeches of George W. Bush. “This victory  
alone is not the change we seek, Obama said. “It is only the chance for us

to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were.”

Progress. We the people are a work in progress.

And yet as we approach the Reign of Christ Sunday, let us take up Barack Obama on his humility.

As he said, this victory was not ultimately about him, it was about the American people.

And as people of faith, we also know it was not ultimately about us either.

Any true progress is about what we do on the road to the one who reigns above all human structures, all human powers, all human principalities, all human pretensions.

As Obama said in his riff on Dr. King’s words, we “put [our] hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.”

Yes, Mr. President-Elect, but we do not bend it by our own will and effort alone, for the one in whom we hope provides the impetus.

And it does not just bend toward hope of a better day, but as Dr. King pointed out, the arc of history bends toward justice.

In that spirit, I appreciate one tiny word that Barack Obama added to the close of his speech.

How often since 9-11 have we heard the phrase “God Bless America” barked out like an order, a command that God come to our aid.

Barack closed with, “God bless you. And may God bless the United States of America.”

That “may” makes the statement a prayer which does not assume God’s blessing is a foregone conclusion.

We the people are a work in progress.

We the people are not perfectly complete.

Nor are we hopelessly broken.

We are a work in progress.

Are we now prepared to kindle light in the darkness?

Are we now prepared to choose hope over fear?

Are we now prepared to accept today as the beginning of a sea-change in our society and world.

Are we now prepared to befriend our adversaries?

Are we now prepared to trust that God has greater things in mind for all the people?

Are you prepared?