

HOPE FOR A MESSIAH

Second Sunday of Advent¹

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 12.05.2004

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps,
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.”

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.²

In 1861, after a visit to a Union Army camp, Julia Ward Howe wrote the poem that came to be called “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It was published in February, 1862, in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The poem has become perhaps the best-known Civil War song of the Union Army, and has come to be a well-loved American patriotic anthem. The hymn has been sung on many public occasions, including the service at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., after the 9/11 attack on America. The song is common in Protestant hymnals, including ours, but there you are likely to see variations as the words have been changed to be more singable or more modern, and sometimes the song has

¹ Isa 11:1-10; Ps 72:1-7, 18-19; Rom 15:4-13; Matt 3:1-12.

²This text of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is the first published version as it appeared in February 1862, in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

been adapted to bring it into line with a particular religious viewpoint.

Julia Ward Howe's religious conviction shows in the way that Old and New Testament images are used to urge that people put into practice, in this life and in this world, the principles that they believe in. "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." Turning from the idea that the war was revenge for the death of a martyr—John Brown—Howe hoped that the song would keep the war focused on the ending of slavery.

Abolitionist Sara G. Stanley wrote in 1856 that liberty was for her and other African Americans "a phantom, shadowy and indistinct—a disembodied form, impalpable to our sense of touch." While Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream of the day we would esteem one another not by color but by character, Malcolm X saw an American nightmare.

The American Creed, as captured in the Declaration of Independence, is this: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." That is the American Creed; however, the American reality is that time and time again minorities have been excluded from the Creed.³ We have often failed to practice what we preach.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He also stated, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." Reinhold Niebuhr, along with others, said: "If you want peace, work for justice."

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. The word "advent" means "coming" or "arrival," and the "Season of Advent" refers to this time of year when preparation is made to commemorate Christ's first coming and to anticipate His second coming. This is the season to see the world through God's eyes, to see more than what is, to see what can be. Last Sunday, our text was taken from Isaiah 2, and we talked about the hope for peace. Today, our text is taken from Isaiah 11, a passage that proclaims the hope for justice—a passage that sounds much like "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

³See Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious (Isa 11:1-10, NRSV).

Since political speeches were originally made from tree stumps, we use the expression “to stump it” to refer to one who travels about making political speeches. During the recent presidential campaign, we often heard of candidates “hitting the trail” and “stumping it.” In Isaiah 11, the political situation of Jerusalem is dominated by a “stump.” The religious hope of Israel is powered by “the spirit.” The crisis of Israel’s present and Israel’s future is the deep conflict and contest between the *stump* and the *spirit*. The “stump” is the “stump of Jesse,” a reference to the dynastic line of David’s family—the family believed to be the carrier of God’s goodness and faithfulness in the world. That dynasty, however, had come on very hard times. Humiliated by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C. and brought to an end by the Babylonians in the

exile of the sixth century B.C.,⁴ this “stump” portrays a situation of despair and hopelessness.

Then something startling happens: God’s “spirit” enters the picture. Isaiah speaks of God’s life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and spirit that can create something utterly new. This “wind of God” is inscrutable and irresistible: humans cannot control it, cannot manage it, cannot predict it. Isaiah announces that this wind has come to blow over the stump. For the stump, there is only a dead end; for the wind, there are new possibilities. The contest is urgent. Some believe the hopeless stump can defeat the wind and leave Jerusalem with nothing.

But Isaiah knows otherwise! The spirit will prevail! The wind will win, for the stump is not mentioned again in the poem. The little “shoot” of the David line is so insignificant that it is unnoticed. That little “shoot,” however, will be invaded and occupied by the spirit, and thereby completely transformed.

The enabling and empowering of the new king by God’s powerful spirit will make the king an advocate of good, fair, and equitable judgment. The primary responsibilities of the king in the ancient world included the rendering of justice; that is, making decisions about social power and social goods. Isaiah’s new king, filled with the spirit of God, will not be open to bribes (“what his eyes see”) and will not be persuaded by propaganda (“what his ears hear”). Instead, he will be the kind of judge who will attend to the needs of the poor and powerless. In the place of the usual weapons of military office—sword, spear, and javelin—this king will be dressed in justice and compassion.

Isaiah then launches into a lyrical celebration of newness that is as encompassing as all of creation. The new king makes a new world possible. The just king makes a peaceful world possible. “If you want peace, work for justice.” The newness of a peaceful creation follows from the newness of human justice. The oldest of enemies—wolf-lamb, leopard-kid, calf-lion, cow-bear, lion-ox—are made friends. In the midst of the transformed animal pairings, three times a child is mentioned. The little child may be the new shoot of Jesse who will rule over the new creation. Furthermore, the little child depicts the birth of a new innocence in which trust, gentleness, and

⁴For the sake of simplicity, I’ve combined these two events. The text, however, likely refers to one of these events in particular, depending on when one dates the text.

friendship are possible. The new world will be so arranged that the fragile and the vulnerable can have their say and live their lives.

The new possibilities depend on the wind, which the stump cannot withstand. That wind is blowing and that wind will prevail. Advent is our decision to stop trusting in the hopeless stump of human failure and to start trusting in the hope of a spirit-created future. Advent is our decision to get up off our stump and to live by the spirit of God!

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