

Isaiah 40:8-11  
Mark 1:1-8

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Second Sunday in Advent  
December 7, 2008

## A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Jesus came into the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.  
He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. *John 1:10-11*

I came into contact again recently with Walter Bauer's now classic work, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, in which he shows the struggle in the early church to define the parameters of early Christian's faith. Those who won the bitter struggle to define what the "Church" should be, called themselves "orthodox." The rest they called "heretics." Much of the battle hinged on who held the power, who had the most strategically placed theologians and the emperor's support. But what if the outcome had gone another way. What if Christianity *should have* gone a different way. What if our forebears missed something of vital importance in the heat and passion of defending their turf. What if, aground in some forgotten backwater of theological dispute there lingers some long suppressed truth about the real Jesus, just yearning to breathe free again? Something about Jesus that is so close, it's right under our noses, perhaps in the gospels themselves.

I ask this question in Advent because I'm often troubled by the thought that something is *missing*—missing not just here, but almost everywhere in the Church. So what I offer today is not an argument for a different way of being church. Not a plea to hold my view over some other—but an invitation to listen.

Listening is a good Advent discipline. And as what I perceive the gospel calls us to is grounded in a radical view of Jesus, let me recall something Howard shared with me this past Thursday. Every few weeks Howard and I get together for an hour or so to wax philosophical over a late afternoon liquid tenderizer. He told how someone recently asked the Dalai Lama what he would say if he had chance to meet Osama Ben Laden. The great man paused reflectively, then he offered that he didn't know, because first he would want to ask a lot of questions, then he would want to do a lot of attentive listening. So, let me hold up what I see in Jesus, and ask you to decide what I see in Jesus, and ask you to decide what's missing in your life and the church.

Jesus, it seems to me, saw the Judaism of his day aground, and he wanted to right the ship which had flipped upside down. As it lay, it exposed a human institution that had largely capitulated to human values, exerting power and influence where it should have been preoccupied with servanthood and compassion. The church, ultimately tried to right that same vessel, but eventually fell into the trap of copying it, and by A.D. 400 occupying the power vacuum and hierarchy that Rome increasingly vacated. Now, in seeking to follow Jesus, most of us, myself included, tend to be selective about what we take from Jesus, so that the Jesus we follow becomes a reflection—not of him—but of what we imagine to be our best selves.

According to the world's standards, virtually everything about Jesus is upside down. Take his birth. He was born a king in an animal shelter. His kingship remained in such obscurity that, at the inauguration of his ministry in his village synagogue, even lifelong neighbors rejected him in the most violent terms, trying to kill him. Imagine at your twenty-fifth high school reunion, the boy most likely to . . . well, your class never could decide—proclaims himself the Messiah! In Jesus' day, merely coming from Nazareth was like coming from Camden or Chicago's south-side tenements, or a reservation in South Dakota.

Jesus chose disciples from among trade-folk, people with no recognizable credentials, to start a new world order. It's as though he welcomed anyone willing to follow him; with a few conditions, of course, like renouncing everything they had, even their family and possessions. He devised no PR campaign to advance his cause. In fact, he frequently insisted on secrecy after performing a miracle, lest people flock to

him merely for personal favors. He set no detailed criteria for membership in his movement, beyond a willingness to have faith in God, and to seek to be faith-full. Oh, and to follow him, even to death! Death, he assured us, was a new beginning. He set no measurable goals, no “sales” targets or recruitment quotas, required no content exams beyond what life throws at you in seeking to be faithful; no pass/fail mark, no ‘success’ bar to hurdle. Failure was acceptable, seed is going to be lost to birds or stony ground or being overwhelmed by weeds, but the sower sows extravagantly to the margins anyway.

Jesus had a wholly different view of problem solving, taking creative thinking to a new level entirely. Recall the owner of the vineyard who finds a way to employ all the workers in the marketplace over the course of a day, and still pays each a day’s wage. Then there’s the canny steward who’s been cooking his master’s books. At the news of his impending dismissal he conjures a way to make the boss’s creditors happy, and to delight the boss by virtue of his new found reputation with the creditors, and the manager assures himself a place in the home of the creditors if he’s dismissed. Everyone is delighted.

Two of our members, Bob and Karen Edwards, own a winery in California with their son Jonathan. They’re wines are named “Jonathan Edwards”—what a great name in Presbyterian circles, the first President of Princeton (then the college of New Jersey), and a seminal figure in colonial theology. Anyway, Bob recently had a dilemma. A certain restaurateur, whom they had been supplying premium wines, constantly defaulted on his payments to them. Bob knew that if he challenged the man to get a loan from the bank, even as good a restaurant as it was the debts would undermine its collateral. The man owned a fine restaurant, but taking legal action wouldn’t help anyone. What to do?

Then Bob says he remembered Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard from a few weeks ago (Matthew 20:1-16), and he had an idea. So he called the restaurateur and made him an offer. “You host our annual Christmas party for our clients,” said Bob, “we’ll cancel our debt, and you’ll likely get a lot of business into the future.” It was a win-win situation. The man was in tears.

Jesus had a revolutionary view of power over against the prevailing system (a system that still controls much of our lives). He countered the dictatorial power structures of Rome, of Herod, their puppet king, and the national Jewish parliament, the Sanhedrin, promoting instead a populism that was led by the wind of the Spirit of God. As Ched Myers puts it, “the new order of the kingdom does not arise from within existing power relationships but quite independently of them, at the margins of society.” The great heavenly banquet was to be principally for the poor and those who cared for them. Indeed, the long expected overturning of injustice that Jesus promised was not just a future hope. It echoed what is now quite well understood from Old Testament archeology, that the overthrow of the ruling classes and elite among Israel was not by an outside force but the enslaved and servant classes themselves. The God-believing underclass appear to have revolted against their taskmasters, smashing the wealthy’s many household gods. Yet not a single such household statue has yet been found among the remains of the Israelite poor.

Newness of life, he taught, came not through incremental change. A couple of weeks ago I decided to blow a section of leaves in the yard, perhaps thirty by thirty feet. I worked easily blowing them into a big tarp. After dragging the tarp to the compost heap, I turned back, and could barely detect which ground I had cleared. It was hard to make headway with a powerful blower. Incremental change, by comparison, would be like trying to make a difference by picking leaves up one at a time. Real change takes a radical decision to act, regardless of social consequences. Jesus, like John, called the people to “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). But notice the two sides of that equation. Repentance, what we are asked to do, may be demanding, especially when we insist we are right. But forgiveness (God’s part here), *real* forgiveness, is revolutionary, mind-blowingly so. Consider any one of the last six of the ten commandments, and apply it to yourself, if you want an example. Repentance, by the way, was never understood in Israel as an expressly individual thing, but corporate, by one person with and for the people. They had no understanding of the individual apart from society.

Jesus’ teaching was radical. Consider these.

Jesus didn’t have any sympathy toward ritualized religion when it excluded certain people, especially the poor, who were everywhere. Shepherds were considered unclean (it’s tough to bathe on a hillside), so how lovely that Luke recalls them first to be invited at Jesus’ birth. Foreigners were unclean—so how telling that Matthew records the Persian (today’s Iran) magi as Jesus’ first visitors. Or that his most

memorable parable about neighborliness lifted up a despised Samaritan, and the epitome of evangelistic faithfulness in John is a 5 times divorced Samaritan woman. Tax collectors, called publicans, were despised as Roman sycophants, so Jesus invited one to his cabinet (Levi, called Matthew), dined with others (e.g. Zacchaeus), and applauded another for his stumbling, heart-felt prayer, above the Pharisee's, a religious cleric. In short, Jesus applauded wherever he found the soul of religious devotion, not its rote forms.

Overcoming anxiety was big part of Jesus' teaching. And he identified material *things* as a major catalyst for anxiety. You might want to read Matthew 6, and follow the cross references to other passages. Such anxiety has not changed. For himself, Jesus held no personal possessions, beyond the clothing he walked in. He understood his relationship to the earth as holding everything in trust, never as a resource to be plundered. His view of forgiveness was radical. Can there be anything more radical than dying to forgive and redeem *all* humanity, even those who killed him ("Father, forgive them . . ."). Jesus turned the economics of tenure, of wage earning, and of material value upside down. To the rich man contemplating building more barns to hoard his wealth, God whispered in the night, "This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Session, that's Bob Miller's devotional tomorrow night, by the way.

Radical, creative thinking can become a way of life. I think of Andy and Lee Walsh who for some time are taking an Australian family into their home while father has cancer treatment in Philadelphia. I think of Jennifer Neely and her colleagues who make cookies by the hundred to be given away from REACT's food pantry. For the really needy, cookies are the last thing on their list. Mabel Purcell, who runs the pantry, says they light up like beacons when they're offered cookies, and chew on them all the way to loading the car.

Creative, often courageous thinking, the sort that Jesus employs, can change your corner of the world, and it's infectious. It has the power to turn the world upside down.

Amen.