

“2011 – A Reflection. . . .”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Annual Meeting Sunday

January 29, 2012

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One of the reasons we “always have done it” a particular way is that that way has seemed to “work” and we’re reluctant to let go either of the peak experience, or to try imagine a new one! This worship this morning looks to me a bit more like the way we always do it, rather than what might have been imagined in combining a Sunday worship and an Annual Meeting!

But enough of my second-guessing myself. . . and consequently a word or two about our Scripture this morning. . . . First of all, there really aren’t many passages in either the Old or New Testaments that reference Annual Meetings! And absolutely none that mention Corporation By-Laws! [You might get into some that hint at “Terms of Call,” but we won’t get into that question!]

2011 was your first full year in the wilderness of the interim! And, some will quickly suggest, as of this morning, it’s almost 2 full years. What might we say in retrospect of the Year of our Lord, 2011?

I’ve shared with some of you that years ago, when I was working on my Doctor of Ministry degree at San Francisco Theological Seminary, I was invited by a couple who lived near the seminary to join them for dinner. He had been ordained to the gospel ministry years before at the church I was serving and continued to get the church newsletter.

During a very gracious evening of good food and conversation, my host continued to speak of all the wonderful things that were going on at my church. . . to the point that I wondered if he were speaking of the same congregation I was serving!! Where had he gotten the notion that life there was as marvelous as he was suggesting?? And then it hit me: all he knew about the church was what I had written in the newsletter each week!

I fully recognize that the same might be said about me all these years later. . . but in this case there is one huge difference: **You, Grace Covenant, are really as healthy, alive, and full of God’s Spirit as any might suggest!** It’s not just my “glass half-full” interpretation. . . . You are living more and more into a full expression of God’s Covenant with you. . . and so, yes, grace abounds!

Mind you, there are limitations to how much Isaiah 61 can be used to speak of Grace Covenant in 2011. . . You’ve not been in exile. . . you’re not rebuilding anything – literally or figuratively. But it just might have some application for this time of expectancy and preparation. . . .

I think it is instructive here to consider the question of our ecclesial future in light of the words of Third Isaiah. The theme of “rebuilding” is explicitly present in the text. Standing amidst the ruins of a broken city, the distinction of the people’s past barely a distant memory, God’s Spirit rests upon the prophet and compels him to speak of hope.

Yet in the absence of the once glorious Temple, deprived of a righteous king in whom they could place their trust, the breath of God reveals through Isaiah a new vision of how things were going to be. The rebuilding, he suggests, will begin from the ground up, from the strengths and insights of those whose voices had long been ignored or forgotten.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor... (Is. 61:1-2a)

I find it interesting that it is not entirely clear **who** is being anointed here. Commentators are fairly certain that this is not some misplaced coronation hymn, as was once claimed by scholars. Another possibility is that the speaker is a symbolic representation of the people of Israel, the collective, . . .the suffering servant whose vocation was to declare to the world through their humble, even despised station in life that the Lord was doing “a new thing” (Is. 43:19).

The people of God would indeed build up the ancient ruins and raise up the former devastations, but it is clear from the prophet's words that they could not rely simply on the established and exclusive order of their past. But in this precarious uncertainty lay their hope.

It is true that there wasn't simply one theological voice that was being cultivated in Judah at this time. Though reconstruction followed the lead of Ezra and Nehemiah, there were nevertheless some among the people who saw in the reestablishment of the status quo a threat to God's freedom and mystery, and thus a challenge to God's authority.

In short, they were not content simply to fall back on tradition, and especially on one that had been so obscured by their recent captivity. Rather, they sought intimations of divine wisdom not only in scripture but also in nature.

So when Isaiah appeals to shoots springing up from the earth, the implication is that God's work in creation provides a glimpse of how righteousness and justice might eventually be established in the land: not according to human design, but by God's immeasurable providence! From the scorched earth of ruin new life would indeed spring.

And from our modern vantage point, we can now observe that if there is anything to be offered by the wisdom of the earth, it must include the insight that true vitality lies not so much in the monoculture of establishment, but in the polyphony of diversity, in the ability to balance the conversation among many voices.

As you know, I've recently spent some time with Phyllis Tickle's book, *The Great Emergence*, which is basically an eloquent elaboration on an observation made by the Right Reverend Mark Dyer, that "about every five hundred years the church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale" (p. 16).

You may remember that Rodger Nishioka referred to both Dyer and Tickle, when he was with us in September. They believe we are currently in the midst of packing up the things we want to divest and polishing up the things we want to preserve.

I've recently spoken to Mary Sue Thomas about being Grace Covenant's first "Archivist!" Now is the time to be gathering the artifacts of our story and beginning to catalog and name them. As you collect that common history, there will be hints of idealization of past ecclesial glories.... They should be among the first items to be placed on the discount table, with prices slashed dramatically!

What really needs to be preserved as we progress more and more into 2012 is this: given the faith and openness demonstrated among many of the younger members of the body of Christ today, and given the inscrutable wisdom of the Spirit, we cannot even begin to imagine the direction the church might take in the not-so-distant future!

This is as true for our outpost of the Kingdom as it is for the whole of Christianity!

Who knows? Perhaps one day we will find communities of Christians who are open to including agnostics in their fellowship. Maybe liberals and conservatives will eventually come to co-exist in the same community. [God forbid! ☺] We must not limit the power of the Creator to do "a new thing." Shoots will spring up among the ruins; life will turn up in unforeseen places!

All about us we experience regularly the dying gasps of a five-hundred-year-old model of authority! It is to be found in our political institutions, it is to be seen in our economic realities, it is happening across social customs and definitions! Those gasps are but indignant, yet toothless, objections to finding oneself on the hard luck end of a rummage sale!!

And I am grateful for one important insight here. . . While we anticipate the calling of a new pastor, we are already experiencing the fruit of God's Covenant with us! You are, in tangible ways and spiritually, forming a radically *renewed* image of the church.

It remains to be seen what that anointment by God will mean for you as a congregation, but you are clearly building the Kingdom!

For the year 2011, thanks to you. . . thanks be to God!! Amen.