

“Band-aids for Deep Wounds”

Isaiah 61.1–4 & 8–11 and Luke 2.1–5

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 11 December 2006

It was a dark, cold night on the way to Bethlehem. Theirs was what we would call a “non-traditional” family. There wasn’t a husband, a wife, and 2.6 children, living in a split-level home in the ’burbs. Instead, there was an unwed mother-to-be and her intended, making their way toward Bethlehem on foot, perhaps with a donkey, so that they could be counted and taxed by a foreign army of occupation. And when they finally arrive, there is no room at the inn. If not for an innkeeper who shuffled them into a stable, they would have been homeless, as well.

In our own Poudre School District, there are more than 200 kids who have no home. Some live in cars, others sleep on a couch at a friend’s house. And that’s part of the reason our senior high kids (and a few brave adults) slept out on Plymouth’s front lawn last night: to be in solidarity with people who are homeless.



You may have heard this section of Isaiah’s prophecy before, or perhaps you’ve heard it in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus pulls out the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue and begins reading aloud: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”<sup>1</sup> It’s interesting to me that Luke’s rendition is a bit different than the Isaiah text. Isaiah begins with “bring good news to the *oppressed*.” He doesn’t say anything about the poor (though there was certainly a lot of crossover between those two groups).

Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the most renowned Christian scholar of the Hebrew Bible, says this about the nature of God in the Isaiah text: “*The God who delivers* is the God who can disrupt any circumstance of social bondage and exploitation, overthrow ruthless orderings of public life, and authorize new circumstances of freedom, dignity and justice. The *verbs of deliverance* refuse to accept as a *given* any circumstances of oppression.”<sup>2</sup>



Most Jews in the first century – *500 years after this part of Isaiah was written* – were expecting the coming of a messiah. They thought the messiah was going to come and change the system: throw out the Romans and establish God’s kingdom by force. But Jesus wasn’t quite the messiah they had anticipated. He was not a generalissimo like David, but rather the Prince of Peace.

We are co-creators of the kingdom of God. That’s why the incarnation is such an important concept (*regardless of how you interpret its literalness or mythic quality*): God came into the world in a unique way through Jesus to show us how to do things differently. But, the message is clear: we heard it from Isaiah, we heard it from Jesus and we can still hear it today. So, why aren’t we doing something about it? Some of us are.

You’ve undoubtedly heard about Christian Peacemaker Teams in the last two weeks. Their motto is “Committed to nonviolence by getting in the way.” And I would ask us to offer prayers for their four members who are being held captive in Iraq: Harmeet Sooden, James Loney, Norman Kember, and Tom Fox. Walter Brueggemann wrote that justice is “the earthly form of God’s holiness.” So let us pray for these four holy people.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4.18–20

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (WJK, 1998), p. 208.



Dom Helder Camara, a Jesuit, once said that if you feed the hungry, they'll call you a saint; if you ask **why** they are hungry, they'll call you a Communist.

It's important to ask ourselves why we are doing a particular mission or social outreach project. Are we doing it because it makes **us** feel better? Is that bringing good news to the oppressed?

I heard a story about a town located on the coast, and there was a beautiful, high cliff overlooking the ocean. The problem was that people kept falling off the edge of the cliff onto the beach below. There was much concern in the town about the problem. One charitable-minded church decided to raise funds for an ambulance to bring them off the beach and to the hospital. But seeing the root cause of the problem, another church raised funds to build a fence along the cliff.

I think one of the roles of the church is to get behind the immediacy of a situation and try to address the root causes of injustice, oppression, and poverty. The Latin word for *root* is "radix," and it's where we get our word *radish*, and it's also where we get our word *radical*. And in our current national climate, addressing the root causes of social ills is often perceived as radical. This isn't a Republican-Democrat issue. There are people on both sides who want to change the system, yet there are even more who are invested in the status quo, the quick fix, and getting re-elected.

As people devoted to furthering God's sense of social justice – enunciated by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus – we need to keep asking **why**.

Why are people homeless in the wealthiest nation the world has ever known?

Why is it okay that we have a minimum wage that leaves the people in poverty?

**Systemic problems require systemic solutions.** When my four-year-old son gets an "owie," it can usually be taken care of with a kiss and a band-aid. But if someone came into an emergency room with a deep wound, a trauma surgeon wouldn't stick on a band-aid and discharge the patient. For too long, we Christians have been ignoring the deep wounds of our society, or just treating them like "owies." Band-aids simply won't work. Instead, we need to encourage our society to build fences that prevent people from falling off the cliff.



We don't often associate Advent with social justice, and sometimes we don't identify social justice with God's abundance. The good news is that there is **plenty** on this planet: plenty of food, enough materials for shelter, and enough knowledge to share. There is an abundance in the mind of God, and so in the human spirit, to release those who are held captive, either by others or even by themselves and their own self-seeking schemes. There is an abundance of compassion for those who grieve. We just have to learn to share.

We journey in this season of Advent, with Mary and Joseph, with sages from the East, and with simple shepherds in the field. We journey toward Bethlehem, which in Hebrew means *House of Bread*. . . a sign of God's abundance. Come and be filled! Then pass along that strength and wealth to others. There is plenty of God's good news to go around.



I will leave you with these thoughts by the great 20th century theologian from our UCC tradition, Reinhold Niebuhr: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."

May that faith, that hope, and that love be yours this Advent season. Amen.