

The Third Sunday in Advent 2007
State College Presbyterian Church
Dr. Charles Curley

God's Promise: Justice
"For I the Lord love justice."
Isaiah 61:8

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-9
Luke 1:46-55

If you were here last week, you will remember that it struck me how simple God's promises are.

God's Promise of Meaning came down to listening, finally listening to Jesus say: love God, love one another.

This week: "For I the Lord love justice." How could God's promise of Justice be simpler than that?

But like last week, simple is not the same as easy.

To hear God's promises is one thing – to live them something else indeed!

That can be harder than hard.

As Jesus discovered when he stood up in his home synagogue in Nazareth and used these same words from Isaiah to tell the homefolks what his ministry was all about.

He read –

[18] "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
[19] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4)

He closed the book, looked them right in the eyes and said: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The Promise of Justice has been fulfilled in me!

They heard him, but they did not believe him! Ran him out of town. Tried to kill him.

Why? Because they believed the policy of the management of this old world, more than they believed the promise of Justice from God's Son.

Neither do we believe him.

We pay lip service to justice – live in a nation founded on the principle of “Liberty and justice for all.” But we must not believe it – because we do not live it.

We do not live in a world built a policy of justice.

Our leaders do not act for justice.

Our people do not demand justice.

We have become accustomed to the way things are.

We believe that the way things are is the way things have always been, and always will be.

Things are and always have been based on self-interest. Self-interest of those who have power to take care of themselves. Corporate executives who reward themselves with 300 million dollar bonus. Congressmen who pander to lobbyist money.

Greed holds sway.

Money talks.

Self-interest rules.

The poor we have always with us.

And the policy of the management intends to keep it that way.

Into such a world, against such a policy of greed, apathy and self-interest, came Mary.

A simple, poor, powerless young girl.

In Mary, God's Promise of Justice found a voice.

The policy of the management is to keep Mary quiet – to shut her up.

So in all our dazzling Christmas celebrations – with every kind of nativity scene, every kind of angel song, every kind of Christmas cheer – how often do we listen to what Mary has to say?

Mary just moves serene and silent through our Christmas celebrations, seeing everything, saying nothing, “pondering it in her heart.”

Isn't it time we stopped just looking at her, and listened to her.

What she has to say is revolutionary!

It happened like this.

“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” (Luke 1:39-40)

“With haste!”

Alone.

Pregnant, alone, young.

Mary went to her kinswoman Elizabeth – who was pregnant, alone, older.

Their menfolk were nowhere to be seen.

Elizabeth's husband Zechariah had been struck speechless in the Temple.

Mary's betrothed Joseph had run away, for the moment, at the news of her pregnancy.

Mary and Elizabeth were alone.

Alone but far from helpless.

This is developing into quite a dramatic scene.

Woman, past her time, with child.

Girl, before her time, with child.

One husband can't speak.

The other has run away.

How lonely they must have been.

Who gave them support?

The woman affirmed the girl.

The girl affirmed the woman.

They affirmed one another in the face of the snickers on the block – in the face of their own uncertainty.

They affirmed one another with the promises of God.

It is a lovely picture – but it is more, much more --- when you listen to the words!

When you let Elizabeth and Mary have a voice.

Elizabeth “exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! . . . And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1:43, 45)

And then Mary, simple Mary, began to speak.

Sweet, gentle Mary – how do you see her? – in a pale blue shawl? – Mary has a political time bomb in her words!

Mary speaks about God reversing the fortunes of the world and overturning the policy of the management.

Nothing less than God's Promise of Justice!

I didn't believe it when I read it either! How could I have missed this? How could I not have heard the power in Mary's voice?

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones.

God has lifted up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich empty away.

“According to the promise,” the promise of justice.

Who would be the rich, the proud, now, do you suppose?

Maybe I was more comfortable when Mary was voiceless!

But she is not.

God has chosen Mary to deliver the Promise of Justice as she delivers God's child to the world.

And the policy of the management has been to bury her voice under a pile of finsel!

For the policy of the management, of those who are always in charge of this aching old world, is to not hear Mary. The policy of the management is to say the way the world is, is the way the world has always been, and the way it always will be.

The policy of the management could not silence Mary.

The proud, unbending Joseph was scattered by the imagination of his heart. Lowly Mary was exalted.

The policy of the management could not silence her son.

Who more than Jesus, in his dying and rising, has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, and lifted up the lowly?

The early church almost gave in to the policy of the management. First the disciples expected Jesus to stay alive and reign forever. But he died. It almost destroyed them. The management, the powerful had the upper hand. It almost destroyed them because they thought “dead is dead” and it was all over.

Then he lived! And everything they ever thought and dreamed was overturned. And they never gave in to the policy of the management again!

The policy of God is the promise of justice!

“For I the Lord love justice.”

What does the promise mean to us?

Some time or other we have to come to terms with whether we are willing to give our lives for this child. We have to come to terms with what we will become if we don't.

If, for example, we choose to take Zechariah and Joseph as our patron saints.

We could run away like Joseph. How could we run so we wouldn't look bad? We could run away by sentimentalizing the Christmas story. It's just a sweet, innocent baby. We could run away until we are bludgeoned like Joseph into accepting our own personal revolution.

We could be like Zechariah – not speak of the coming revolution of the Son of God at all.

But, you know, Mary just keeps speaking --- Mary's words won't go away.

God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

This is the way God chooses to penetrate to the very core of our being – through the voice of Mary.

Do you believe this is the policy of God?

That Jesus came to fulfill the Promise of Justice.

So that hard as we try we can never completely ignore it?

If so, what does God want from us?

According to Mary's son, it is quite simple.

The Promise of Meaning last week was simple: Love God, love one another.

The Promise of Justice is equally simple for those who choose to live their lives through that love.

Here's what we are to do:

Jesus said: "Whatever you wish someone would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

So simple. Until you try to do it.

What would the world be like if we lived by those words.

Do you know, almost every religion in this world believes some version of those words?

They are virtually universal among people of faith: Jew, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Confucian.

We all say we believe them.

We seldom live by them.

What a revolution it would be if the world lived by those simple words.

This is the Promise of Justice:

- all treated equally
- all treated fairly
- all treated with mercy
- good is not good for me unless it is also good for you

This, Jesus says, is all the law and the prophets.

Do you choose to live by this simple promise – the promise of Justice?

Mary does. Jesus does. Do you?

“For I the Lord love justice.”

Amen