

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

God's Promise: Meaning  
Isaiah 40:6-11  
Mark 1:1-11

“The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand forever.”  
Isaiah 40:8

“Now is the Age of Anxiety,” wrote the poet W. H. Auden at the middle of the last century. His poem of that name spoke of humanity's quest to find substance and identity in a shifting and increasingly complicated world. A quest, in other words, for meaning – not only for the meaning of life – but for a life lived with meaning, direction, and purpose, in a world which seems to negate all three.

The Age of Anxiety has, and continues to be, an age of seeking – seeking answers, seeking security, seeking a faith which will sustain us.

And the major characteristic of this search seems to be that, whatever we are looking for, we cannot find it where we are, here and now. What we have here and now is not adequate. We must seek elsewhere for the meaning which is missing.

Are we like the proverbial cows who, penned in a perfectly adequate pasture, stick our heads through the fence and stretch our necks out for the green grass that is just beyond our reach – because the “grass is always greener on the other side of the fence?”

Isaiah's people were in exile.

It was a harsh exile.

They wept, and gnashed their teeth, and yearned for home.

They remembered the green, green grass of home and decided if they could only get home everything would be all right.

The green grass of home came to stand for everything they had lost. Came to stand for everything they needed to bring meaning to life.

Their yearning for everything they had lost, and everything they could not have, both saddened and infuriated the prophet Isaiah.

For Isaiah knew that their meaning was not to be found in their yearning. Their meaning was in the promise of God. God brought meaning to their life then and there, even in exile. In exile, with nothing, they still had God. The word of God was still alive among them, and could provide them with everything they needed.

But they were so absorbed in yearning for the green grass of home that they could not hear the word, the promise of meaning.

Isaiah said in effect – yes, grass can look green and lush and full of life. But it will deceive you. It is temporary. It looks good in spring, but it cannot stand up to the summer’s heat and the winter’s cold. Do not let it deceive you.

The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

And so they turned from their wistful yearning for green pastures to the hard work of rebuilding a faith which would bring meaning even in exile.

And it was not easy!

The Promise of Meaning does not promise it will be easy, for our God is complex and mysterious.

The quest for meaning in our century has been particularly plagued by those who insist on easy answers – even when they do not exist.

As a pastor, when someone asks me a theological question I am thrown into a rapid internal time of mental processing – before I answer -- trying to judge just how complicated, detailed an answer they want – or will take the time to hear.

“Was the world really created in seven days?”

“Is everything the Bible says true?”

“If God is so good, why do bad things happen?”

“What about salvation?”

I have to process – do they want the thirty minute answer, or the thirty second, “sound byte” answer?

I know that in our day the search for meaning has often become the search for quick and easy answers.

And easy answers are hard for me!

I confess to being a person who sees the world in complex shades of grey – not in black and white.

So the quest for meaning – the understanding of God’s promise of meaning – has always been challenging for me. And still is! Most easy answers leave me cold, are inadequate.

Yet, I wonder, how often do I get lost in the complexity of all those shades of grey? Is the Promise of Meaning sometimes simpler than I would allow?

I wonder if the Promise of Meaning does not in the end lead us to a simple answer – not an easy answer, but a simple one – and simple can sometimes be as far from easy as you can get – for the simple answer in the Promise of Meaning can lead us down a very difficult path indeed.

It was said of John the Baptist, “And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Mark 1:5)

They came seeking meaning for lives that were empty and troubled.

John could not supply that meaning.

He could only prepare them.

Prepare them for the meaning that was coming.

Repent, confess, prepare. That was John’s message.

Until one day a man came walking down to the river to be baptized, and in that man John saw the promise of meaning in human form.

John on his own could only tell them what to turn away from.

In Jesus, John gave, to a seeking, yearning people, one to turn toward – for direction, purpose, and meaning for their lives.

Now “comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” (1:7)

And just so there was no mistake about who this is – the spirit of God descended on Jesus as a dove, and a voice came from heaven saying:

"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (1:11)

From then on Jesus became the "why and the wherefore" in the lives of those who followed him.

"O come let us adore him," the Christmas Carol sings.

Adore him they did!

Those multitudes who followed him adored, praised, glorified him with all their hearts.

And the whole time it seems God was becoming more and more frustrated! With them! With their adoration!

Because apparently adoration, praise and glorification was not what God had in mind with the Promise of Meaning.

So – just as at Jesus' baptism – God spoke again – with the same words!

Did you know that? Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree that God said the same thing about Jesus twice? Once at the beginning of his ministry (baptism) and again just before he turned to go to Jerusalem and the cross (transfiguration)?

Both times God said "this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased."

But the second time God added something.

The second time God said, God cried, "This is my Beloved Son --- LISTEN TO HIM!"

Listen to him.

Is that what the seekers were missing?

Is that what we are missing?

All through his life people came to Jesus with their needs and agendas – came to Jesus putting on him all their expectations – realistic or not:

"Jesus, heal me." "Son of Man, my daughter has died." "My brother would not have died if you had been here." "Hosanna to David's Royal Son!"

And all the while, it was clear that mostly they did not listen.

Had they listened – would James and John have fought for precedence – "make us first when you come into your kingdom"?

Had they listened – would his disciples have turned the children away?

Had they listened – would they have hailed him as the new David, no matter how often he told them his kingdom was not of this world?

Had they listened – would his followers continued to hate Samaritans, Greeks, Romans, hate everyone who was not just like themselves?

So to the adoring, praising, glorifying multitude of his followers God cries in frustration: “Listen to Him!”

And still does!

2000 years later we are still seeking, and still not listening!

If we are listening, why are we still seeking?

If we are listening, why are we still looking for meaning, as if we do not know where meaning is to be found.

If we are listening, why does the grass (in a spiritual sense) look greener on the other side of the theological fence? With Seeker-Sensitive, Purpose-Driven Possibility-Thinkers? While the eternal word is here with us, wherever we are?

All the time God keeps crying, “Listen to him!”

Don’t just adore him and glorify him, listen to him.

Don’t just anticipate his coming, celebrate his birth, listen to him.

Don’t just believe in him and accept him, listen to him.

So, if we do listen to him, what do we hear?

We hear that, even for people like me who see the world in shades of grey, the Promise of Meaning is rather simple (which is not to say easy):

A young man, seeking meaning, came to Jesus and asked what life is all about. How are we to live?

Listen to what Jesus says:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37,39)

We spend so much time seeking, yet when we listen it is so simple (but truly not at all easy – or we would do it more often than we do – love God and love others).

This is the promise of Meaning.

Meaning is not in seeking and finding. Meaning is in listening and doing the word of God, which alone endures forever.

Love God.

Love one another.

Everything else is like grass!

The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Amen