

New Orleans 2010

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 5, 2010

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7:8-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Let us pray: Lord I believe help my unbelief, Amen.

On behalf of Trudy, Dick, our friends from Florida, and Brooks, whose home we helped to complete, I want to thank you all for your support and your prayers. John, I would also like to thank for this opportunity to speak of our journey to New Orleans and the little white house on Arizona Street, which, by the way, I learned this past week is just about complete! I would also refer you to the wonderful article written by Trudi for the latest issue of the Pine Hill Press.

This morning I would like to share with you our time in N.O. and what we were about through the lens of our readings from Isaiah, Today's appointed psalm and the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. For the question is much bigger than what exactly do we do when we are in New Orleans, for that matter on any mission trip? The bigger and more important question is, why are we in mission, why should we be going to New Orleans at all and why should you support us in this endeavor?

With out the lens of scripture it is simple to describe what we did. We spent a week mudding, taping, and sanding dry wall, along with doing some minor carpentry and cleaning. But through the lens of today's lessons the events of the week take on a whole other meaning and indeed a whole other urgency.

Perhaps you have heard the story about a little girl who is awakened by a violent thunderstorm (or in this case hurricane). Terrified by the rain beating against her window and the loud crack of thunder, she cries from her bed “mommy, mommy where are you?!” Quickly her mother comes to her, sits at her bedside and hugs her tightly. Seeing this as a teachable moment about God’s love, she tells her daughter “whenever you are frightened you need to remember that God loves you and is always with you’. “I know that!” The little girl says, sobbing. “But I need somebody with skin on”

And don’t we all, whether it be in times of personal despair, community tragedy, or social and economic injustice. It is as true in N. O as it is in Haiti, in Pakistan as in Bangladesh in Detroit as it is in Pleasant Point Maine. And isn’t that why the prologue to John’s gospel “The word became flesh and dwelt among us” is filled with such meaning, expectation and hope. Just As are the words from Isaiah “He shall not judge by what his eyes see or by what his ears hear but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...”. As I read them, a central theme throughout the prophetic tradition, from Isaiah to Amos, from Micah to John the Baptist, is that God is first and foremost interested in justice and compassion for the poor and powerless. “He has told you o mortal what is good,” writes the prophet Micah, “and what does the lord require of you, to do what? “To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” And let us not forget that the Prophets were primarily speaking to the religious people of their day, both the

common and powerful. As Eugene Peterson, Author of the biblical translation, The Message notes in his introduction to the book of Amos “None of us can be trusted in this business (religion). If we pray and worship God and associate with others who likewise pray and worship God, we absolutely must keep company with these biblical prophets. We are required to submit all our words and acts to their passionate scrutiny to prevent the perversion of our religion into something self serving. A spiritual life that doesn’t give a large place to the prophet -articulated justice will end up making us worse instead of better, separating us from Gods ways instead of drawing us to them”. And as John the Baptist points out, with the coming of Jesus “The times”(to quote my favorite folk singer) they are a changing”. “His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”. If we, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, when it comes to matters, of faith think we have it all figured out we are sadly mistaken and we’d better take heed of the One to come, the one whose sandals he is not worthy to carry.

The scenes acted out in today’s scripture; the coming of a new era in Israel, David’s impassioned prayer for the new king, and Johns proclamation of the coming messiah, are not each an end in themselves. Rather each points to the good news of a God who cares first and foremost for the least of those in Gods creation and we as Gods

People, indeed as Gods disciples, have first and foremost the responsibility to carry out Gods mandate. I believe that the message of advent is about stepping out of our comfort zone and following the one who said :

“When in I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, when a stranger you welcomed, me when I was naked and you gave me clothing, was sick and you cared for me, when I was in prison you visited me...Truly I tell you just as you did it for one of the least of these you did it to me” And I believe that to take these words of the master seriously is to realize that each of each of us are judged by the degree to which we worry more about are own personal wholeness, whether spiritually, economically, or socially, than the spiritual, economic and social wholeness of Gods most vulnerable.

If I hear today’s lessons correctly, mission, out reach to the least among us, is not the work of a church committee. It is the church! And Worship, rather than an end in itself, provides the nourishment for the work at hand. This worship, as beautiful as it is, this building as sacred and meaningful as it is, is only a means to a more glorious end.

When we were in N.O. we stayed at what was once Trinity United Methodist Church. But Trinity and its surrounding neighborhood were a victim of the post Katrina flooding. The neighborhood is slowly

coming back but in April of 2006 the church was deconsecrated and in 2009 turned into a mission team center. Boy, the more I thought of it the more I realized how wrong the powers to be were to think that this place is no longer a church!. On our last night, I looked around the pew less sanctuary, with its simple but majestic ceiling pointing to the heavens, There was make shift altar in the middle of the room set up for the Eucharist, surrounded by building materials, shelves full of tools, and case worker's desks lining the walls. The fellowship hall was filled with willing but exhausted workers, and the second floor class rooms were filled with wooden bunk beds for those weary workers. I realized then that this place, this deconsecrated church, was perhaps more of a church now than it had ever been! Its congregation is new every week, made up of a motley crew of Methodists, Baptists, Jews, non believers and even some Episcopalians and pseudo Episcopalians. Even though it has no pastor, and no committees, it has been part of an incredible gospel movement which has renewed hope for 12,641 home owners through the work of 8,000 volunteers giving over half a million volunteer hours! To quote Trudi " a magical and affirming experience...all doing what we are suppose to be doing in caring for our world and each other."

The word of the prophets, if taken to heart, is just as relevant and thus no easier to hear in our time than it was when Jesus was thrown out of the temple. But it is the knowledge and experience of Gods grace which gives us the courage to accept their challenge. The grace which

God offers us is not cheap but it is freely given each time we choose to take upon our selves his yoke and follow him. As Saint Teresa of Avila reminds us:

**Christ has
No body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours;
No feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes
Through which is it to look out
Christ's compassion to the world;
Yours are his feet
With which he is to go about
Doing good;
Yours are the hands
With which he is to bless now.**

Amen