

Advent, Then Christmas
11/27/05

Last Sunday, the Carroll Strafford Association received the Maranatha Indonesian Fellowship into Covenant relationship with the United Church of Christ. It's a pretty significant event when you take in a new church, perhaps made even more so by the composition of this church's membership. New Hampshire is not where you would have expected such an ethnic event! John Thomas, General Minister and President of the UCC, may have best described the unexpected happening in his letter of welcome, saying that the Pilgrims who landed here would undoubtedly never have envisioned an occasion such as this.

Of course, if it were not for the persecution that the Indonesian Christians felt in their homeland, there would probably have been no ceremony last Sunday. But just as the Pilgrims found religious freedom in America, so the Indonesian Christians found the freedom here to practice their beliefs. And in the United Church of Christ they saw strands of a heritage coming together that provided a thread of extravagant welcome to them. They worship now in Madbury without the fear that their church will be closed down or burned, their members shot at.

As we paraded from the Sanctuary at the First Church in Rochester to a most sumptuous and spicy meal downstairs, the delegates were given white squares of cloth to wave. The initials of the church – changed now to MIUCC, the Maranatha Indonesian United Church of Christ – were inscribed colorfully for all to see. It was a festive moment at a gathering of gratitude.

The way we look at time is revealing, amusingly so if you think about it. We tend around here to be a fairly punctual people who like to put our time to good use. “Waste not, want not” you know! Last week as I waited for the service in Rochester to begin, I looked more than once at my watch. The 3 o'clock starting time stretched later and later. Not until 3:30 did the processional begin. Afterwards, I heard we had just experienced an example of “Indonesian Time.” Sort of ironic to find oneself waiting a bit impatiently (for 30 minutes) for a service to begin...when that service is one that recognizes a people who have spent years struggling to be free venturing forth to establish their religious identity in another land.

But, if you must know, I am impatient when lines are long at the market. At the hardware store Friday, I got out of a long line to look for another item, just hoping the line would be shorter upon my return. I find no delight in standing behind people. Nor do I especially like long lines of backed up traffic. We used to leave Pennsylvania at 5 in the morning, and I am not an early morning person, just to get around Waterbury, Danbury and Hartford before the Thanksgiving Sunday rush of cars!

For a while the term “instant gratification” was offered as one reason for why our society has grown impatient. We are so accustomed to having everything at our finger tips, waiting has become an unnatural act. We are so used to getting results that when we are thwarted, it frustrates us. We like to accomplish things, otherwise we feel as if we are wasting time.

If you ask people, they might say Christmas is their favorite time of year. Seldom if ever would they say Advent was their favorite time. But Christmas is literally a day, advent a month. It is the time to ready oneself for the coming of Jesus. It is a time of watching for the baby's arrival. It is a time of expectation. If we are going to understand the fullness, then it behooves us to prepare our hearts and minds for the angel's announcement. Rabbi Lionel Blue had it correct when he said, “If you really want to see if God is real, you should give about as much time to the God hunt as you would need for holiday Spanish or for learning the guitar.” In other words, more than we do! If we are to be prepared for Christmas it means we must try to understand all that preceded Christ's coming.

For me, Advent (and Lent if you will) is the best times of year to look (not a glance but a look) at the words of prophecy found in the Hebrew Canon. This is when they make the most sense given the context of the religious season we find ourselves immersed in. The voices we hear are those of people who are living in expectation that God's presence will break forth in an entirely new and otherwise unheard of way. And they are prophets calling others not to give up hope, no matter how long the wait seems! No matter how difficult the times; no matter how long and tedious the struggle.

Isaiah was one of these visionaries whose voice we hear. It was probably the Assyrian Empire that Isaiah mainly wrote about, because it was at its peak during his lifetime. But he also foresaw the time when the Babylonians would enter the picture and become an even greater force to be reckoned with. In today's reading, it sounds as if Isaiah has reached a point of desperation. His wait has seemingly been endless. His patience has run out. Previously, his ranting was directed to the Hebrew people, advising them to alter their ways. However, he now seems to give up and turn directly to God, pleading for God to act. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" All appears lost to Isaiah if this God fails to come down and prove that other Gods are nothing in comparison. "Come down, the mountains even will quake at your presence!"

Isaiah personifies God: "Come down," "meet people," be "angry" with us, show your "face" to us, "hide" yourself no longer. Isaiah uses verse 9 to suggest the God is the great Potter – "We are clay...we are the work of your hand." Obviously God is invited to remold the world in the divine image of goodness and love! But the basic message is the same – act. Act now! "Come, O God, come."

Tucked in the middle of all this is Isaiah's one great hope – that God remembers the faithful people who have waited for this glorious day. In spite of sin and the domination other powers who have brought with them other, strange Gods to believe in. "From ages past, no one has heard, nor ear perceived; no eye has seen any God beside you – for you are the one who works for those who wait." Advent can never be a time of quick solution. It is historically a period of time that recalls those who have waited patiently for the fullness of God's authority to be revealed. It is the memory then of a struggle against overpowering odds. During that time the light is kept aflame only by those who remember the goodness of this God. Even in their sinfulness, they keep the hope that God will prevail against the evil forces of darkness. Come down and "meet those who do right, those who remember you in your ways!"

If you look closely, the story is the familiar one that is centered in religious oppression. The Hebrews are struggling to assert their particular cultural belief in one holy God. Neither the Assyrians nor the Babylonians allow them to honor their heritage. Outnumbered and intimidated, many yield to the call of others to obey foreign Gods they are unfamiliar with. In Babylon, many Jews would intermingle, even intermarry, and so lose their religious identity. Isaiah represents those who carry on, in spite of the shame it brings to them. In spite of the consequences! Knowing that salvation comes to those who remember truth. To those who live with integrity, not by force or coercion!

Taking time for Advent is not merely allowing plenty of time for shopping so that the presents will be ready on Christmas morning. But at least we realize that Christmas shopping is not a quick and easy activity that we will accomplish in an hour or even a day. We spend a month recognizing Advent, because in so doing we recall the Hebrew people who spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness so that they could simply reach a land of milk and honey – a land where they could worship God freely as they so chose. We remember those who followed whose struggle caused such despair that even the greatest of their prophets – Isaiah – one day cried out in desperation asking God to come down, the wait had been so endless.

Advent means remembering that Jesus was born into that hope. That he looked to a day when all people would be liberated by the God of love, whose word frees all from aimlessness and sin, while bringing about community where all share equally. Advent means knowing that the same longing lives today as we pray for Indonesians, their churches burnt to the ground, seeking simply to worship in peace. Likewise those in

Zimbabwe and in China, and elsewhere throughout the world – people who long to worship without interference and cling to the hope that one day they will be able to do so. Pilgrim peoples everywhere that are denied the privileges that we take for granted. Not just those who hunger for religious liberty, we also pray and support those whose speech and movements are restricted as well. Isaiah identifies such people as the ones “delivered into the hand of iniquity.” Advent means we are all waiting until God’s coming is hidden no longer from any one of us!

“Maranatha!”...which means Come Lord Jesus. Come release all your people from the bondage that denies religious liberty and justice to people anywhere in your great world. Amen.