

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ
January 3, 2010
Second Sunday in Christmas
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings:
Jeremiah 31:7-14 and John 1:10-18

Sermon Title: The Promise and The Hope

(open with prayer)

It was day three at the Pastor's conference in Deland, Florida. Most of us had gathered from the north to spend a week in February in our shorts and sandals pretending that we were being good people for suffering so much and going back to school for a few days. It was in that comfortable place that United Church of Christ theologian Walter Brueggeman stood before the two hundred preachers and blamed the crowd for making faith difficult. The church was declining, not because God lacked the desire and love or that the Bible had somehow become irrelevant, but because we got in the way. The law and prophets are blatantly clear in their message of connection and relationship. God wants us to be together, has paid for the transportation, food, and lodging, but inevitably some pastor thinks they ought to be checking people in and they get in the way. The church is the worst kind of security, in that it serves to keep people out instead of welcoming them in, and too many preachers have confused awe with fear. Haven't you ever gotten a really good gift and your jaw dropped, you felt unworthy, and yet were profoundly grateful? That is the appropriate response to God's desire for you.

The prophet Jeremiah talks of God's desire for the children to come home. It doesn't matter how far you have gone, how many wrongs you have done, or how separate you may feel. Reconciliation is possible. In fact, it is the one promise that connects and affirms all covenants. You are loved, created, blessed, and filled with a renewing grace that calls you back home time and time again. The role of the church, temple and synagogue is to remind folks of the invitation and offer rides so that people don't miss the boat, train, or plane. Walter screamed from the pulpit, "Get out of the way." "Stop putting boundaries on God's love." "Shut up once in a while." "You don't have all the answers. In fact, you don't even have some of the answers." The role of the preacher and prophet is simple. Remind people who they are and whose they are and extend the hand of welcome and return. The prophet really sets the stage for Jesus' arrival as the one who will bring people together.

Here comes the light. The path that was in shadow before is now clear. God is calling us back home. It is the hope and comfort for those in process of dying. Follow the light and return home. It is the hope of those who have been oppressed and suffered, follow the light and return home. It is where we know the meaning of love, compassion, kindness and patience. When we stand in the light, we are free to experience all good things and to respond with gratitude and joy. It is where mourning turns into dancing and sadness in joy. The Gospel of John begins with this wonderful poetry because we sometimes we need the abstract to show us the way. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus helps us know God, not by offering some insight into deep theological understanding or the validation of our own choices of religion. For this Gospel writer, the Word becomes flesh and lives with us.

When the church gets caught up in its intellectual pursuits and its quest for knowledge is becomes a church of the word. We protestants are actually really good at being a church of the word. We read it, proclaim it, print it, make it into slogans, sing it, espouse it, diagram it, and admire the word in all of its two-dimensional wonder. However, sometimes the word becomes much more. Instead of talking about hospitality we actually open our doors to homeless families for shelter and safety and then we have beautiful faces and we begin to understand that the word hospitality is now flesh. We talk a lot about love and compassion, but until we sit with other s in their pain and practice forgiveness they remain just words instead of words made flesh. The hope of the church is in our living and loving, not in words, but in words made flesh. It is why we will continue to hope that our Opportunity Next Door fleshes out. It is why we continue to offer Centering Prayer in the certain hope of flesh forming around the words of "prayer" and "community." It is why there are opportunities to advocate for justice, take to the streets to march for peace, and humble ourselves in the opportunity to serve. We wouldn't be a church that follows Jesus if we didn't allow flesh to grow on words like: justice, peace, and service.

The danger of the Gospel prologue is worshipping other words in that three-dimensional way. So far, the words I have mentioned have all been attributed to the way Jesus went about being in ministry. The power of the word made flesh to heal, inspire, and grow was incredible. It first started with Israel as both a person, Jacob, and a people. Israel is a beautiful, fleshy word that God continually calls together and regards as favored and chosen. Unfortunately, it describes people and not place. Israel is not land, property, walls, or government, it is the name of the people who bring to life God's desire for reconciliation and love. Once that word became the name of a country or nation, bad things began to happen. Putting flesh on a word that describes a nation or a corporation allows us to fall in the trap of worshipping false idols and limiting God's

love and grace. Hope dies when we begin to personify governments and flags. Our religious and political debates over healthcare, military strategy, and energy policy are mired in fleshy monsters of party politics and corporate interests that are based in fear, destruction and violence. What I hope we do in this New Year is to remember the invitation. Jesus allows God to be known, not in idea form, but in the love and compassion of those around us. It is a kind of knowing that transcends language, race, nation and culture. Economic barriers are broken down in the presence of kindness and love.

In the January Mustard Seed, my article is about the light of the world as it was made known in one of the most significant ways in the past decade. While many people define the decade around the events that took place on the morning of September 11, 2001, I believe that is a way to look at the world through a lens of fear and control and protection. It limits God's love and grace. The really defining moments of the last decade were actually on the days following fear. Around the world we heard stories of community, justice, service, and love. Words became flesh. People reached across boundaries of nation and race to help one another and cry with one another. Sporting events were canceled, movie theatres shut down, and celebrity rumor mills ground to a halt in those few days of grace and truth. It was before the rush to retaliation and the call to spend more at the malls. The defining days of the last decade and of our lives are when the distractions subside and we walk in the light, and they often are preceded by a time of suffering. For it is when we are most vulnerable that God seems most present.

It is my job to remind you that God's promise is real and that your hope is real. For those that seek, you will find. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. The Word is made flesh and dwells in all your living and loving ways. For we are not bystanders or observers to the idea of God; we are the participants and co-creators of love and light.