

Sunday, July 14, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Everyday Sins”

Last week, at Silver Lake, there was a group of 5th and 6th graders, whose focus was connecting Dr. Seuss stories with biblical themes.

The primary book in their study was “The Lorax” a 1992 story about saving the earth.

The theme of the book is “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, Nothing is going to get better. It's not.” A simple truth.

One afternoon I was invited to lead a conversation about other cultural references to the Bible.

We explored literature, music and art and how it was influenced by stories from the Bible.

They were an impressive group – these ten and eleven year olds. They were able to quote C.S. Lewis, reference Handel’s Messiah and identify all the characters with Biblical names in Moby Dick.

I believe that now that they have had this conversation, they will be more intrigued by scripture and more alert to the many references they encounter. Scripture is an integral part of our lives – whether we know it or not.

Our readings today are a perfect example of this same theme.

The proverbs, compiled by post-exilic sages – a social class that served as counselors and teachers during the divided kingdom – are found throughout Isaiah’s prophecy written over 100 years later.

Jesus’ many parables about vineyards are rooted in Isaiah’s opening story.

The themes of sin and forgiveness are evidenced in Paul’s letter to the Colossians over 500 years later.

All of them find a way into John Bunyan’s literary work, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, over a thousand years later.

Pilgrim’s Progress was first published in 1678, with part 2 in 1684.

It is recognized as the only book, other than the bible, to be so widely read over such long period, never having been out of print.

I was reminded of this book while I was reflecting on Isaiah’s interpretation of sin.

Primary sin for Isaiah is the sin of pride – pride that makes us wise in our own eyes and shrewd in our own sight;

the pride that causes us to reject the law of the Lord and to despise his Word;

the pride that believes we can manipulate God by empty ritual, while reserving our hearts and loves for our selfish selves;

the pride that makes us think that we can run our own lives and be our own gods in the world.

Interpreting Isaiah, Elizabeth Achtemeier says

“God judges us in all the little things of life, in the terrible simplicity of everyday.”

Isaiah is not looking for great big transgressions.

His point is that the way we live – each and every day; the way we treat one another; and the way we treat God – these are the things on which we are judged.

According to Scholar Edward Young:

Isaiah exercised his prophetic ministry at a time of unique significance, a time in which it was of utmost importance to realize that salvation could not be obtained by reliance upon man but only from God Himself. For Israel, it was the central or pivotal point of history between Moses and Christ. The old world was passing and an entirely new order of things was beginning make its appearance.

In the choosing of Israel God did a gracious thing.

Upon this chosen people God showered abundant blessings.

To Israel He clearly made known his ways.

Our passage today is a living picture of the goodness of God as God lovingly plants the vineyard and tends to it.

However, there is more.

This story is a clear refutation of the notion that Israel chose the Lord.

For Isaiah, the choice of Israel was a matter of pure grace on the part of a merciful God.

The owner of the vineyard, we are told, did everything to cause good grapes to grow.

Likewise God, in dealing with Israel did everything to bless His people.

The grace of God is sovereign; it breaks down all walls of resistance, accomplishing that end for which it is designed.

It is an irresistible grace, but although it is irresistible, it is yet grace, and so makes the stubborn heart willing.

Isaiah calls his people to accept this gift of grace and blessings.

Our proper response to such a God, says Isaiah, is a life of trust – trust in which we give up our reliance on our own defense, our own wisdom, our own security and plans for the future, and place our lives in God’s hands, to be guided according to his wise plan and secured and made whole by his power.

For those who choose a different path, Isaiah delivers his denunciation in the form of “Woes.”

Our translation of the bible uses “Ah, you” instead of “Woes.”

I like Woes. I think the message is stronger with a “Woe.”

Woe to You seems more powerful and direct than *Ah You*

Isaiah’s point is that irreverence and deep wickedness are close partners.

When they prevail, chaos is the result.

People who live in this chaos recognize evil and address it by name.

They speak to that evil as though it were a person saying “Thou are good.”

In our lives today we can point to those engaged in an evil course who proclaim the importance of what is true and what is good.

Last week we talked about Isaiah’s theology of God’s enormous power.

This week we are again reminded that true wisdom derives from God and is to be found alone with God.

To neglect the source of true wisdom leaves us dependent solely on our own human mind, cutting off the grace and wisdom that originate with God.

For Isaiah, God’s power is the only power that can forgive us our sins.

Paul’s letter concludes with the same, “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

John Bunyan, like Isaiah and Paul, wrote at a time of cultural upheaval.

He was a preacher in the Independent Church who was jailed for twelve years under the reign of Charles II because of his refusal to stop preaching.

For Bunyan, conversion meant turning away from sin and turning toward God. By forgiveness of sin, he believed that eternal life is gained.

For those not familiar with *Pilgrim's Progress*, it is a story about a man's journey from one city to another, an allegory about the Christian experience of conversion leading to salvation.

The story is presented as a dream in which the dreamer sees a man (later called Christian) with a book in his hand and a heavy burden on his back, in great distress because the book tells him he lives in the City of Destruction, and is condemned to death and judgment. Advised by Evangelist to flee towards a Wicket Gate, he sets out, leaving behind his wife and children who refuse to accompany him. The course of his subsequent pilgrimage is full of danger and adventure. It takes him through the Slough of Despond, past the Burning Mount, to Wicket Gate, the Interpreter's House, the Cross (where his burden rolls away), the Hill Difficulty, the House Beautiful, the Valley of Humiliation, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair, Lucre Hill, By-Path Meadow, Doubting Castle, the Delectable Mountains, the Enchanted Ground and the country of Beulah.

(Beulah, by the way is the Old Testament word for the land of Israel. Isaiah uses it in his 62nd chapter, as the name of Judea.)

On the way Christian is helped by trusty companions; first Faithful and then Hopeful.

They encounter enemies such as Lord Hategood, and Giant Despair who imprisons them in Doubting Castle.

They encounter false friends like Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, Talkative, By-ends and Ignorance – all who give them dangerous advice.

In the end they pass over the river and enter the Celestial City.

In part 2 of the story, Christian's wife and children accompany him on his journey along with their neighbor, Mercy.

They are joined by fellow pilgrims along the way: Mr. Feeble-mind, Mr. Ready-to-halt, Mr. Honest, Mr. Valiant-for-truth, Mr. Stand-fast, Mr. Despondency and his daughter, Much-afraid.

Many of the characters the pilgrims meet are not, on the face of it, wicked people deserving damnation: indeed most of them think they are on the path to Heaven.

But what Bunyan insists upon, based on his own theology of salvation, is that there is only one way to Heaven and only those justified by faith will get there.

Those who trust in morality like Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, or who are downright hypocrites, like By-ends and his friends, or who only have a 'head' knowledge of religion, like Talkative, are not going to get to the Celestial City.

Even ignorance of truth will be no excuse.

The character of that name, Ignorance, is quite convinced that he is not a bad man. "I have been a good Liver...I pray, Fast, pay Tithes, and give Alms."

But when he gets to the gates of the City, he is not admitted, but is bound and carried off to Hell.

Isaiah is referenced 28 times in Pilgrim's Progress.

What this says to me is that the fundamental truths of scripture are timeless.

The paradox of good and evil, of darkness and light – have interested humans since the beginning of time.

Each generation has found a way to explore these concepts in their own place in time, in language that speaks to a particular audience.

What I like about Bunyan's story is the personification of each personality trait – each virtue and each vice.

These different characters shine light on the complexities of our own personalities.

We are prompted to think about our own prevailing tendencies.

Last week we learned the names of Isaiah's sons - *a remnant shall return* and *the spoil speeds, the prey hastes*.

This week, in hearing the names of the characters in Bunyan's tale we are drawn to examine our own lives.

Let's look at some of the questions raised by today's readings:

What vehicles have introduced you to scripture?

Where are the prophetic voices in our society today?

Who is calling us to greatness?

Who would be the main character in an allegory about your life?