

## “HAVE WE NOT HEARD?”

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20C

February 8, 2009

The Rev. Ryan Lambert

As most of you know I spent the last week of January in Berkeley attending the Earl Lectures, Pacific School of Religion’s annual lecture and continuing education event. The theme, *Behold, A New Thing: Emerging Expressions of Worship*, provided me with much to think about concerning the future of the church and my own understandings and expectations of worship. While the Earl Lectures were at the center of my thought process when I started forming this sermon I am thankful that our scripture lessons have assisted my theological wonderings about the God and the future of the church.

Our lesson from Isaiah comes from the section where the prophet prepares the Hebrew people for their return to Jerusalem. The Hebrew people have been in exile for a couple of generations—their grandparents had been conquered and removed from their homeland, and they and their parents had never really known their homeland—living only under the oppressive rule of the Babylonians. And now Isaiah has the unenviable task of convincing them that they should return to Jerusalem where God has something new and better in store for them. This chapter of Isaiah features a series of questions that are used to illuminate God’s unending presence in the midst of the Hebrew people’s lack of faith, insecurity, and fear. But these questions: “Have you not heard?” “Have you not known?” And, “To whom will you compare me?” are not the insulting questions that they seem to be at first glance. Instead, they are questions meant to provoke **both** the memory and the imagination of the Hebrew people so they can remember the power of God that has been forgotten in the difficult days of the exile AND can also imagine anew what God might have in store for them. These questions allow this interaction to become a testament to the long and continuing relationship that has existed between the Hebrew people and their God and offer the Hebrew people hope for the next leg of their journey.

The words of the 147<sup>th</sup> Psalm are likewise words that are a testament to the enduring relationship between God and God’s people. This psalm is among the five closing psalms found in the Book of Psalms; and like the other psalms of this section, it opens and closes with “Hallelujah” (Praise the Lord!) and between its choruses of praise its lyrics announce the greatness of God. In this song the psalmist invites the Hebrew people to sing praises because God has built up Jerusalem and gathered the outcasts, because God is both powerful AND understanding, because God cares for the lowly and defeats those who are wicked, and because God gives all that is and is steadfast in offering love. Praise the Lord, says the psalmist—because of all that God has done and continues to do.

Both of these readings offered reasons for the Hebrew people to follow God. As contemporary people hearing these words, they ring no less true. However, after my experience in Berkeley, I am left to wonder if the church as we know it isn’t in need of some provoking and prodding. Perhaps we need a prophet to shake us up, to plead with us to re-imagine what we are and what we should be. Perhaps the church is in need of a new reformation—of a movement that will take the church from the place where we speak

of it as “ours”—filled with our songs, our pews, our styles, our structure, and our teaching methodologies—to a place where the church becomes THE place where the needs of the world are met, where the needs of the individual are cared for, where the weirdness, the raggedy-edges, the explorations of the next generations will be welcome and invited—and will eventually become commonplace expressions of God’s gifts.

But we, all of us, get stuck in the “I need it my way” religious tradition, and that is dangerous. If you look at the data it has been especially dangerous to the health of mainline denominations like the United Church of Christ. How stuck can we get? I would like to show a video clip that will illustrate my point. Let me be clear: it is an exaggeration, but it is informative of how we too often want church our way.

Excerpt from VIDEO here.

“Have it your way” faith isn’t pretty. We know it isn’t the faith we are called to have, yet it is sometimes our default setting. One of the messages I heard loud and clear from EVERY speaker and preacher at the Earl Lectures was that if the mainline church is going to survive and be relevant in the future we are going to have to change our default setting which says that the mainline traditions are THE way to do church.

One of the most moving speakers I heard in Berkeley was Dr. Gerardo Marti, a sociologist and religious & cultural critic. (He is also a blogger which gave him generational credibility!) Dr. Marti brought both the opening and closing addresses at the Earl Lectures; and in his closing address he wondered about how Christianity must change if it is to remain relevant to future generations. He spoke profoundly about how what is being called the “emergent church” has evolved because the generations that followed the baby boom have sought new ways to do church when they have felt stifled or ignored by both mainstream Protestantism and evangelical Christianity. They (or generationally I should say “we”) have sought models of church that do things differently: they create “project teams” to do worship and pastoral care and structures that are decentralized and fluid. Their lay leadership, and even their membership, often completely turns over every few years due to career changes among members. The Emergent Church has, at its core, not a structure or even a rigid doctrine, but a sense of community AND a sense that from the community called church comes the passion and energy for providing real hope and change in the world. And all of this comes from a community committed to living out the gospel of Jesus Christ and celebrating the wonders of God’s gifts.

Marti spoke in depth of Mosaic, an Emergent church in LA where their structure dictates that, “The church is not here to serve us (and neither are our pastors); together we are the church and we are here to serve the our world.” This model is radical—in that it takes one’s faith and immediately requires that that faith be put to work in the world. Marti noted that this church is radical because it assumes that the church they are creating is not for them, but for the world and for those in the next generations—even for the generations that haven’t been born. And when he said that, I wondered, “Am I doing that? Are we doing that? Are we building a church that is comfortable for us, a place

that has worship that we like and programs that we like—a place that is home for us, but is closed to new things or new visions for our faith?” Or are we legitimately thinking about and creating a community that nurtures not just those of us who worship here every week, but the ones who come through the door and want to worship, pray, do outreach, learn, and teach in new ways? This is a beautiful, blessed, and holy community, but are we open to the change that might walk through our door next Sunday, next year, or might be fermenting their faithful dreams for the church in the CE wing this very day? Are we open to the change (or changes) that might be necessary if we are to meet the needs of the generations that are in their 30s, 20s, and below?

One might ask, “Do we have to change?” I don’t think there is a clear answer, but I want to share one view—one that exemplified what I heard in Berkeley. Phyllis Tickle, a lay Eucharistic minister in the Episcopal church and a senior fellow of Cathedral College at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. , in her book *The Great Emergence* proffers that reformations have happened in the Christian church roughly every 500 years and she notes that we are thus due for the next one—one which she calls the “Great Emergence.” Tickle recounts that the Reformation (or the Great Reformation as she believes it should be called) had its climax in Luther’s nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenburg church on October 31, 1517. She recounts that roughly 500 years earlier was the Great Schism of 1054—assigned this date not because it can be encapsulated in 1054, but because that is when the fracture of the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic can be seen as “official.” Roughly 500 years earlier takes us to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century and the papal reign of Gregory the I or Gregory the Great—who is known for bringing the church ecclesiastical and political coherence after the disastrous aftermath of the Council Chalcedon—when doctrinal rules were codified and set even as steep disagreements remained. Gregory the Great led the church toward the monasticism that would protect, preserve, and characterize it for the next 500 years. All of these reformations pale in their effects to the reformation that happened with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian church in the first century. Each of these reformations—or re-formations of the church happened at roughly 500 year intervals and Tickle is among many who suggest that we are on the precipice of another Christian reformation—she believes that the Emergent church is the model that is being birthed in our current reformation. I am honestly not sure if she is right, but I agree with her that something is happening and I likewise agree with her belief that mainline Christianity much embrace reformation and not get bogged down in “have it my way religion” or we risk quickly becoming irrelevant and even possible death.

But I won’t leave you there, because amid the calls for change that I heard in Berkeley, amid the dramatic expressions of worship, amid the technology running rampant--there was also an acknowledgment that the outward-looking basis that has formed the Emergent church is founded upon the social gospel that rose out of and galvanized the mainline church for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Just as the Hebrew people were being told by the Prophet that their God has not forgotten them, that their God has always been there, that with God they will soar, so too should the mainline church recognize the steadfast nature of God’s love and the breadth and depth of God’s ability to reveal new things in our lives. I suspect that the Hebrew people felt like their exile was a death

sentence—but God remained with them. I suspect that every reformation felt like the death of the church. If we are on the leading edge of the next reformation of the church it will be hard and there will be growing pains. But haven't you heard, don't you know, God will remain; God will be steadfast through it all. Our only job, then, is to be patient and loving with each other as we are re-formed by God. And one more thing: perhaps we should start and end every day with a Hallelujah or two!

Thanks be to God. And the people of God said, "Amen."