

“Turn About is Fair Play”

3rd Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

December 11, 2011

You have heard the saying, “I don’t get mad. I get even.” Behind these words lives the idea of treating someone in the same way that person had treated you. Usually this refers to that which is negative. Perhaps, someone tricked you and now you want to trick that person back? We assume “Getting even” will help, make us feel good, or right the wrong that had been done. “Getting even,” “Tit for Tat,” “turn about is fair play” all are ways of saying the same thing. History is punctuated with people and events in which this principle was lived out. This is not to say that these people were bad or worse than the rest of us. When you have been hurt, lied about, or just ignored, over the span of time it can be very difficult to not become a person who seeks revenge, some kind of pay back, of wanting just desserts.

When we met people who are cynical often they become that way from having been played, taken advantage of, or made out to look like a fool. No one remains immune from such events. Each of us is affected by these events. Some more. Some less. We are after all, sinful by nature.

We live in what can be described as a broken world. A world that doesn’t work the way it was created or intended. Like opposite poles on a magnet, rather than attracting we repel one another. Tension remains, friction is experienced, and words are said that create hard feelings. We end up focusing on our hurts and those who cause them. Like spoiled children we seek ways to hurt back. We refuse to forgive. Instead of letting go of the hurt we seek vengeance, revenge, and retaliation. Our actions are justified by our litany in life, “Turn about is fair play.”

Over the years I have found the Bible, and in particular the Old Testament, to be a pleasure to read and that it is filled with stories with which I can relate. I relate to them because they are about people like you and me. They are regular people, struggling to find their way through the hurts and failures of life. The people in the Old Testament feel as we feel, frustrated by others lying to them, being hurt by words and actions, gossiped about regarding events that may never have happened. Like us, they feel that “turn about is fair play.” Yet, God touched their lives and did things that were unexpected.

What the Bible gives witness to a God who acts differently than we. God comes and does a different thing. God offers a rose instead of a sword, a cheek instead of a fist, the life of His son rather than the lives of our children. God acts in a way that redefines “turn about is fair play.” Instead of revenge or retaliation, “turn about is fair play” come to mean forgiveness, grace, acceptance, and restoration. Our lesson was written at a time when Israel experienced just that.

Israel had passed through a time filled with unbelief and the consequences of such action. Israel had prayed for her sins. It is now a time of renewal, rebirth. This wasn’t just for Israel as a nation, but for the individual as well. It was “payback” time. Only now “pay back” was intended to bring life and not to destroy it.

Isaiah was anointed (given authorization) to tell Israel what was about to take place. Having gone through the shame that her suffering brought upon her, God was about to do a new thing, to restore her fortunes, and renew Israel. The saving act of God described by the prophet was like a garden. God's saving work was not a once-for-all kind of deliverance. Instead, it is the steady and uneventful affecting and blessing by God. Time and again God blessed Israel. Salvation not only touched the nation but the individual as well. Perhaps these touches of God are not earth shaking in their scope. Mountains were not moved and seas were not divided. But over the span of time they had a profound impact upon Israel's life.

Since Abraham God has been tilling the garden of humanity. God has been clearing the weeds of sin, hate, and violence. God has been clearing the ground that it may receive the seed of God's love. This seed when planted yields a produce that gives life, creates relationships, and restores humanity. Perhaps this is no more clearly seen than in the season of Christmas? The seed sprouts and the earth bears a child, a holy child. Out of the broken ground of humanity comes faith in Jesus, God's seed. The effect of this one event is immeasurable. Lives are touched, calendars made, the world in time becomes a different place. Instead of anger God brings forth gentleness. Instead of a closed fist we receive an open hand.

Over time, through the years God continues to till the soil, work humanity, and care for the garden. Over time each day weeds are pulled and seed are planted. Perhaps not so noticeable but still present. Yet in a moment, in a phrase of a song, the lyric of a poem, the strength of the Word of God a weed is pulled and a seed is planted. We will no longer be the same. The hand of God, after all, has touched us.

In some ways Advent is a time to wait and watch for God's tilling in our lives. It is a time to prepare to receive the seed. It is a time to know the love of God and not God's wrath, to feel acceptance and not accusation, to be lifted by hope rather than to be thrown down by despair.

The weeds of sin will always continue to plague our lives. It will grow and try to choke out God's seed of the good news of Jesus Christ. We see this happening as we see people seek revenge and retaliation. We recognize it as people justify their hatred and bitterness through the lie of "turn about is fair play."

We can be thankful, as Israel was, that in regard to God activity "turn about is fair play" does not mean getting even. Instead it means turning in love, acting out in righteousness, patience, mercy, and forgiveness. It is the work of God in Jesus. A work made known in a baby born on Christmas Day. Regarding God's movement in our lives, we can be thankful that "turn about is not fair play."

AMEN