

Recognizing and Recounting

Isaiah 63: 7-9 Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23



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The passage from Isaiah which we read as our first lesson this morning could easily have been written for this final Sunday of the year. The prophet is in a reviewing mode. He is looking back – not into the future as we expect prophets to do. He is taking time to reflect on the past in a particular way. He is “recounting” - focusing on what has been happening in the lives of the people. And that is what we have come to regard as fairly standard stuff as we come to the end of a calendar year.

Isn't that what is going on all over the place these days? Publicly or privately we are reflecting on our own experiences as 2007 comes to an end. What kind of year was it? Good? Not so good? Really great? Only average? Glad it's over? Sorry to see it end? Was this the year that brought you to a particular age or stage in life – or to a time of “no comment” about such things? How will you remember 2007?

It is probably unfair to try to capture the year in a single word or to give it a simple plus or minus; but the end of a year does bring with it a summary mentality, doesn't it? We are all caught up in looking back and trying to remember what happened during the last 12 months. Certain things immediately jump into our minds and make their way to the top of our lists: a change in our family – a birth, a death, a marriage; or perhaps there has been a job change or a move; an accident or an illness; a vacation trip or a special visit; a new regimen or a standout event. Those are the things that most quickly come to mind; the ones most easily recalled and recounted. But then there are the other things – the ones where remembering requires more concentrated thought or a little nudge from someone else to bring them to mind.

When I skim through the year-end editions of various publications, I am always amazed by the “Year in Review” articles. There are so many items listed that I have completely forgotten – events I remember noting at the time, but which then got lost in the recesses of my mind, hidden behind newly arrived images, forgotten in the endless stream of people and places and happenings we hear about every day.

So, in a way it is good to come to a point on the calendar – and in our lives – when we can pause for a moment and look backward; a time when we can review and recall, celebrate and contemplate a bit of our past; a time when we can prod ourselves to remember some things we were close to forgetting.

I believe that is exactly what Isaiah was doing in our text for the morning. But he frames the exercise a little differently. Isaiah talks about “recounting the deeds of God”. What he is doing is looking at his own life, at the life of the community, at the passing parade of the nation’s history – and locating God in the midst of that recollection. It is like posing the question: “What has God been up to in 2007?” What kind of year did you and God have?” Clearly we are not going to be like Joseph, able to cite dreams that provided us with God’s instructions, so how do we incorporate God into our year-end reflections? How do we recount the deeds of God?

As we create our various lists of 2007 happenings, we can certainly indicate our pleasure or displeasure with the individual events or with the impact they had on our lives. But that is not the same as finding the hand of God in some of those happenings – not the same as being aware of God’s activity as we move in and out of these recalled moments. This is not about associating God with only the pleasant memories. It requires a deeper look to really discern what God has been up to...if we are willing to make that effort. The question is when you and I put together our “Year in Review” will God’s hand be noted – or unseen - or unacknowledged and ignored?

The latter was the case for Christopher Buckley. Buckley is a teacher and writer who had been raised in the church, but in his adult years had drifted into what he called “the agnostic camp”. Then one day his 5 year old daughter asked him, “What’s God?” The question took him very much by surprise. Why do kids always ask the questions you are least prepared to answer? Buckley had gotten very proficient at not relating God to anything in his life or anything in his life to God. But now he realized (and I quote) “I did want Caitlin to grow up open to God...aware of things spiritual...which is not to say that I hope she’ll run off with the first Jehovah’s Witness who knocks on the door. Quite the contrary. I want her to be able to look that Jehovah’s Witness right in the eye and say, ‘you’ve got to be kidding!’”

What his daughter needed, the slightly agnostic Mr. Buckley realized, was some biblical grounding – an understanding of God, not by dictionary definition, but by becoming familiar with images of God in action. Plus, he said, “I’d rather she know something about Abraham and Moses and Jesus instead of Barney, Lamb Chop and Thomas the Tank Engine. She already knows about them” (Barney and the Bible, 1995).

Buckley goes on to describe with humor and humility his attempts to read a children’s version of the Bible to Caitlin, and his struggle to elaborate on his “God is everywhere” statement by answering questions like “Is God in my bubble gum?” and “Is God in my big toe?”

Many of us can identify with Buckley’s dilemma and with the difficulty of making God’s presence real for children. But does his humor – and ours – mask the real problem; that we are not prepared – not ready, willing and able – to recount the deeds of God in our own lives, in our own world; that we are not prepared to talk to children - or anyone else - about all of the “every wheres” where God is?

In an overstuffed and over-stimulated world, developing a heightened sense of God’s presence is not an easy matter, but it is also not an impossible assignment. We may not be living in Isaiah’s simpler time nor have his clear focus, but we have not been left without a way to proceed.

Three steps are necessary – and they are all implied in Isaiah’s words about recounting. First, we must develop our own knowledge of God. We must “scout out God” in much the same way a sports team scouts out an opponent. We need to learn about God - about God’s inclinations and tendencies; God’s ways and means. There was a song some years ago that talked about “looking for love in all the wrong places”. Without some God-background and understanding, we may find ourselves looking for God in all the wrong places.

Christopher Buckley wanted his daughter to be as familiar with Jesus as she was with Thomas the Tank Engine. That’s not a bad goal. How would you rephrase it for yourself? To be as familiar with God as you are with your favorite literary character or your favorite investment

newsletter?...to be as familiar with how God operates as we are with how “amazon.com” or the NFL playoffs operate? You get the idea. If we are to concentrate some attention on discovering God and perceiving God’s activity we need to know who we’re looking for. We need to learn where - and how - to look.

Then second, we must use that knowledge of God to become expectantly watchful in at least some of the right places. God will not often be discovered in the lives of people who do not expect to encounter God – who are not alert to God’s presence in their world. If you are someone who regards looking for God in the events of 2007 as a futile activity, then I can guarantee that finding God there will be a virtually impossible task. But if you are aware, as Isaiah was, of how God operates then you will see God’s activity throughout your 2007 recollections.

What we are pointing toward here is an anticipation based on experience. In the same way that we anticipate seeing a work colleague when we walk through the office door or finding our favorite periodical in the mailbox each Tuesday, so we need to anticipate God’s presence in our lives. We need to trust that God has been there – and will be there in the future.

So we develop a knowledge of God; become expectantly watchful; and then finally, we must (as Isaiah did) recount God’s deeds. We need to learn to talk about the places where we have seen God - where we have seen God’s love; God’s providential hand; God’s faithful presence.

Why does that pose such a difficult challenge? We can talk about the deliciously prepared meal we enjoyed at a new restaurant. We can go on endlessly about the exploits of our grandchildren or the glories of a newly discovered trout stream or antique shop. We can tell our family and friends all about our genealogical research until they are bored to tears. But we can’t seem to find a way to say that God has blessed our lives, or that we have seen the hand of God in the events of 2007.

Have we truly failed to notice – or have we decided that no such activity exists? Have we become such accomplished complainers that we have lost the ability – the joy – of sharing the abundant blessing, the good news, the divine providence that has been part of our lives – and that we have seen all around us during these past months?

Isaiah in the midst of difficult times was able to see and recount those gifts of God. He was bold enough to point out, “It was not...an angel, but God’s presence that saved you people of Israel; in love and pity God redeemed you; God lifted you up and carried you” (Isaiah 63:9). Can not the same be said for us as we look back on the year 2007?

I think it’s fair to say that when it comes to our recounting we have a little work to do. We need to develop our knowledge of God until we know as much about God as we do about the 9th hole on our favorite golf course. We need to be expectantly watchful anticipating God’s activity in the same way we anticipate our next evening with good friends. And then we need to share our discovery of being guided and uplifted by our faithful God; to share it as enthusiastically as we share our comments about a really good movie. So, as we prepare to enter 2008, let us also prepare to recount the deeds of the Lord, looking back at 2007 and looking forward to 2008. There is no better way to move from one year to the next. Happy New Year ...and happy recounting!

Amen



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