

Advent, Reconciliation

Jamaica Plain, December 5, 2004, Marshall Hawkins

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together." These words from Isaiah are often heard during this time of the church year. They describe a beautiful, utopian vision of harmony. A time to come when traditional rivals will live together in peace.

This vision of the future is part of the lectionary during Advent, with the understanding that the coming of Jesus brings on a new era, a time to come when even enemies are to be loved. So Advent is a season of waiting. A time of longing and anticipation for a new light, a time of greater peace and understanding.

And yet while we wait for a new light, we wait in darkness. It's no coincidence that the lead up to Christmas takes place between daylight savings time and the solstice. When the days are very short, and they keep on getting shorter. It's always darkest just before the dawn.

All of this has me thinking this year about the darkness of our times and I wanted to think with you this morning about a new light that we may be longing for.

It is now a month since the national elections took place. For a lot of people, this year's Advent feels particularly devoid of light. I know many religious liberals have felt abandoned by the larger society lately. Hearing about "moral values" on television and not recognizing our values there. It has been a tough month for much of this country—a month of anger, of fingerpointing and stereotyping.

We find ourselves in a time of deep division. Differences simplified into red states versus blue states. Evangelicals versus liberals. North versus South. The era of the culture wars—when so many people can't understand how so many other people could possibly think

the way that they do. I imagine that there were a lot a tense Thanksgiving tables this year- relatives breaking bread together, but awkwardly afraid to discuss religion and politics.

I fear for the divisions in our society today. And I think of Isaiah's vision of hope for a new era. A time when the wolf might live with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid. A time when traditional rivals might stop what they're doing and listen to one another. For as polarized as we are as a people, we share the common fate of this nation. And we share the fate of this small blue planet.

In Advent we wait and hope in darkness for new light, for the coming of Jesus, and his message to love our enemies and befriend our neighbors. In a similar way, we can wait and hope in this time of division for a new light of understanding. A light of tolerance and togetherness. For the true spirit of Christmas heralds a time when even enemies come to understand that they share a common destiny.

I have to confess that I found this a difficult topic to write about. Perhaps like you, I feel so strongly about some of the issues that divide our society that I cling on tightly to my own righteous anger about them. And that's appropriate, I think.

But this season calls on us to envision a new future marked by greater love and understanding. And no one side of any debate can do that alone. After all, when we talk about wolves and lambs living together, who is the wolf and who is the lamb depends on who you ask!

Last spring, on the campus of Stanford University, students wrestled together with their own battle in the culture wars. They held a series of conversations in their dormitories about the Mel Gibson film "The Passion of the Christ." This film has been a flashpoint of difference and polarization.

As students talked, their differences became clear right away. It seemed as though many of them had watched completely different films altogether. Students who identified as

liberal Christians saw the film as little more than a bloodbath—endlessly violent and profane. They saw it as glorifying a violence that they feel they're working hard against in their daily lives. Meanwhile, the Evangelical Christians were deeply moved by the film, which they saw as portraying Christ's loving and noble sacrifice on their behalf. Jewish students, on the other hand, were offended by the anti-semitism they saw in the movie. And secular students wondered why anyone would want to be a Christian, if this was what it was all about.

The dorm talks were run by the Office of Religious Life at Stanford, which is headed by Unitarian Universalist minister Scotty McLennan. They set up some ground rules for communication. The students were asked to listen before they spoke, trying to put themselves empathetically in the shoes of others as they contributed to the conversation. Each participant briefly summarized the prior speaker's comments before contributing, and did not begin until the prior speaker affirmed that she or he had been understood. The students were asked to use only "I" statements in their own reactions. And yet, they were asked to clearly express their own feelings, beliefs and values.

The conversations seemed to work well. The students were able to hear each other deeply, without judging, arguing or closing up. Everyone learned something new and left with a more sensitive understanding of other perspectives.

Later, Scotty offered three concrete suggestions to help evangelicals and liberals understand each other. First, stop stereotyping each other. Second, listen carefully and empathetically, seeking first to understand and only then to be understood. Third, work actively together in the areas where common cause can be found.

I am inspired by Stanford's experience with the culture wars. It is only one small example, but it was an instance in which people from opposite sides of the fence actually heard each other, and saw one another as human beings. A moment when they recognized that their enemy was in fact their neighbor. Wolves and lambs living together in a dormitory.

Here in Boston there is another instance of this kind of cooperation. It is the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, which First Church is a part of. In GBIO, liberals, evangelicals, Jews and secularists are coming together for common cause. We are finding ways to work together on issues that we agree on-affordable housing, better financial terms from banks and insurance agencies, and better treatment of nursing home workers and residents. And in the meantime, we're starting to get to know each other as people, not just stereotypes.

In this Advent season, as every other, we symbolically await the birth of Jesus. To some he is a savior, to others a teacher. But there are parts of Jesus' significance and message that are not open to much interpretation. He was very clear, for instance, on what is called the Great Commandment. That we should love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind; and that we shall love our neighbor as ourselves.

In order to further explain that second part of the commandment Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. A lawyer asks Jesus who his neighbor is. He wants to know what group of people we should love as ourselves. But instead, Jesus describes in a story what we need to do in order to be a neighbor to the other. And it turns out that we are asked to show mercy and compassion for even those whom we oppose. Even those on the other side.

The more we understand about the parable of the Good Samaritan, the more radical it becomes. The fact that the hero of the story is a Samaritan makes all the difference.

I imagine that we've all heard the story before. A man is robbed and beaten to the edge of death on the long and dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The priest, a holy man, passes by without helping. The Levite, a person who often worked in the Temple, also leaves the victim where he lies.

The third person to see the wounded man and then help him was a Samaritan. The Jewish peasant audience hearing this tale would surely have been shocked with this turn of events. The Samaritans were no random ethnic group. They were the hated rivals of the Jews at the time. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans would have made today's conflict between Arabs and Israelis seem almost tame by comparison.

Samaritans were a mixed race of Israelite and non-Israelite blood, who were despised by pure-blood Israelites. Jews believed that Samaritans compromised the faith by practicing an altered and heretical form of Judaism. The two groups defiled each other's temples and held long-standing blood feuds. The Samaritans were publicly cursed in Jewish synagogues; and a petition was daily offered praying that God might not grant Samaritans eternal life.

But the parable says that it was a hated Samaritan who stops on the dangerous road and treats the wounded man. He brings him to an inn in Jericho-and here too he runs a great risk. Scholar Kenneth Bailey offers an analogy from American history: it would be as if a Plains Indian in 1875 walks into Dodge City. He's got a scalped cowboy on his horse. He checks into a room at a local saloon and stays the night to take care of him. Any Indian so brave would be fortunate to get out of town alive, even if he had saved the cowboy's life. This is how radically the Samaritan acted when he stayed at the inn with the wounded man.

Jesus concludes his lesson with a question of his own. Who of the three travelers was a neighbor to the robbed man? And yes, it was the enemy. Go and do likewise, we are told.

The parable of the Good Samaritan explains for us how to be a neighbor and to whom. Our neighbor is even our enemy. Our neighbor is from the other side of the tracks. Our neighbor is a red stater if we're from a blue state. She is a Southerner if we're a Yankee. He is an evangelical, if we're a liberal.

In this season of Advent, in these darkest days of the year, tradition calls upon us to hope for and anticipate a new light to come. We are asked to imagine a brighter future-when wolves might live with lambs and leopards with kids.

In these days of division and alienation, let us be in expectation of a new time of greater understanding and togetherness. And may we help to create this future by becoming a neighbor even to those we disagree with most. May all of us go and do likewise this Advent season. And may this Christmas to come be filled with peace for all of us.