“What God Wants for Christmas” The Rev. Christine Chakoian
Luke 1:46-53 First Presbyterian Church
Amos 8:4-6; 5:21-24 Lake Forest, Illinois
December 7, 2008 The 2nd Sunday of Advent

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE

It is such beautiful poetry: And Mary said, “The Lord has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” It is beautiful poetry, but it is also powerful prophetic judgment. Here, and in many places in the gospels, Christ’s birth is the advent of great reversals – a time when the rich are brought down and the poor lifted up. It’s not a theme we in the “First World” pick up very often, but it’s all over Scripture. Even the familiar way the gospel tells Christ’s birth emphasizes the disparity of power: When the decree went out from the all-powerful Emperor Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria, Jesus born in a stable because his parents had to travel to the municipal offices in Bethlehem.

Why this reversal? Why this judgment against the rich and powerful? Not because God is a Marxist … or because God hates the wealthy. But throughout Scripture, God has harsh words for the *behavior* of those who have much. It is that judgment we pick up on today with our reading from the word of God as it comes to us from the prophet Amos.

***

Harsh words, aren’t they? They’re even harsher in this modern translation, *The Message* (translated by Eugene Peterson)*:*

"Listen to this, you who walk all over the weak, you who treat poor people as less than nothing. …You exploit the poor, using them-and then, when they're used up, you discard them.
I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals.
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making.
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to me?
Do you know what I want? I want justice-oceans of it. I want fairness-rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want."

Ouch! It is not the nod of approval we were hoping for. We do a lot … don't we? We roll up our sleeves for Soup Kitchen … we write substantial checks for mission … especially this time of year we're up to our eyeballs in good works. Doesn't any of it count? Doesn't it count for something?

Of course it does. God does not disdain our good works. And yet … and yet charity and justice are not the same thing. "Charity is never a substitute for justice," children's advocate Jonathan Kozol said in 2000 … Which sounds very much like, "It is justice, not charity, which is wanting in the world," as author Mary Shelley said in the early 19th c. Which echoes back to Augustine's words from the 4th c. AD: "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld." Charity … charity and justice are not the same thing, and generation after generation has had to discover this for ourselves. What God wants is *justice*.

And charity which is token, and worship which is empty … these are offensive to God, even obscene to God, so God tells us in Scripture.

We are so used to thinking of God as all-loving and forgiving – which God truly is – that we forget that there *are* things that offend God to the core. What offends God most is religion masquerading as true faithfulness … charity and worship posing as true piety.

Maybe that's a new word to us, that there are things that well-meaning Christians do that are abhorrent to God. It's easier to see when it's long ago and far away. I told you once about some friends of mine who toured a church in a town in the Southern tip of Africa. The Dutch Reformed (who would be Presbyterians in America) – the Dutch Reformed had a beautiful sanctuary, with a pipe organ and all, to offer God inspiring worship. Most likely they did charitable works – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and all the other things we do with sincere hearts. But underneath their beautiful sanctuary … underneath the *sanctuary* they housed their African slaves … and they held them there like animals in cages. Their worship was lovely, there charity was generous – but they didn't see – they couldn't see – the colossal injustice they were doing under God's own roof. Surely that counts as obscene to the Lord our God. And it begs us to ask – it compels us to ask – what we might be doing that *we* don't see that is offensive in the eyes of the Lord.

I have started to wonder … I've started to wonder whether it might be offensive to God that in the "basement" of our world there are children in Africa who are getting cholera from drinking polluted water … and babies dying of starvation and lack of basic health care and billions of souls across this world living on less than $2/day ,,, and

children born in filthy stables still, because there is no room for them in the inn. Even in these economic times that are so hard for us, we have so much. We have so very much, while below us, God's beloved children suffer so.

I say these things not to make us *feel* guilty – frankly, guilty *feelings* don't do anybody any good without actions. The remorseful alcoholic who keeps on drinking may feel plenty of guilt, but until the behavior changes, guilt doesn't help. What God wants from us is far more than words … more than charity … more even than worship.

> "Do you know what I want? I want justice-oceans of it. I want fairness-rivers of it.
> That's what I want. That's all I want."

So what would it look like if God got his heart's desire from us? What would it look like for us to do justice? I cannot tell you what God is calling you to do. But I can tell you where I've seen it.

Justice looks like "basement work": literally, in Christian churches across the North who hid runaway slaves in basements under their sanctuaries – in the Underground Railroad. And justice looks like the basement work under the sanctuary of my church in Clarendon Hills when they sheltered homeless guests at PADS every Saturday night through the winter. And justice looks like our basement below us here, where volunteers sort mounds of donated clothing for people to buy – people who could not afford to shop for clothes otherwise – and where all the Rummage donations go to mission. And even more, justice looks like the basement work that still needs to be done – the work of making sure there are no longer slaves anywhere, or homeless families, or impoverished people.

Justice looks like the basement work of water clarifying projects in Africa … and the hospital we are supporting in India and the schools we're funding in Gaza. Justice looks like the basement work of micro-finance projects in the third world, and orphanages that some of you are funding out of your own pockets. And even more, justice looks like a global economy that's fair, and there's enough to go around.

And closer to home, justice looks like the basement work of executives among you who have cut radically back on your own pay so you can keep more people employed. Or the counselor who didn't give up on a high school drop out, and ten years later the kid is applying to college. Or the band of workers going up to Neal School to establish trust and relationships so that the kids in North Chicago have a chance at education. Or the corporate lawyer who tried desperately to tell his board and CEO that the house of cards they were building on derivatives was about to fall and crash. And even more, justice looks like a world where children are encouraged and the powerful are wise.

Basement work matters so much. When John and I moved into our last house in Clarendon Hills, it was new construction – a beautiful house, which we lovingly decorated. But it was a rebuild on an old foundation. And soon we discovered that, though the upstairs was perfect, the basement had cracks and leaks that hadn't been evident before. It wasn't cheap; it wasn't sexy; there wasn't anything beautiful about it. But there was no question: we had to fix the foundation. All the lovely decorating in the world didn't matter if the basement beneath it was rotting.

I don’t know – I can’t know – what God is calling *you* to do. But I can tell you what God wants from you … from us … from all of us that he loves so very much.

> “Do you know what I want?” God asks us. “I want justice-oceans of it. I want fairness-rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want.”

The basement work of justice. It’s what God wants … it’s all God wants. For Christmas. And for always. Amen.