

Now What? – Bob Munshaw

Isaiah 12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

The year was 1988 and I was 19 years old. I had just begun my second year of Bible college. It was my time to make a political statement. As long as I can remember, I have been interested in politics. I versed myself on the issues, and supported the underdog third party (who in Canada's political system actually has a chance). I felt like the New Democratic Party shared my Christian values because they were the party that cared about social issues such as the poor and oppressed. I was a little shocked when a friend from my youth group scolded me and told me that of course Christians all voted for the Progressive Conservative party. I have to say that that stuck in my craw just a little.

My party, the NDP lost. They ended up getting just over 20 percent of the popular vote, compared to the 31 percent of the Liberal Party and 43 percent of the "Christian" Conservative party.

Of course it bothered me that my party lost, but there is another thing that should have bothered me more than the loss, and more than my friend's ignorant comments. I acted like I really cared about social issues leading up to that election. I tried to convince my friends to vote for the NDP, and this is why Ed Broadbent and the NDP should win. If they won, the poor and the oppressed would be better taken care of in Canada. But, here is the thing, and I admit that it speaks poorly of my character. After the election, I can't recall giving another moment's thought to the poor and oppressed. I was happy to "care," and to look like I cared, but if I really cared, wouldn't it change the way I lived? Couldn't I have taken at least some small steps to care and serve in Moose Jaw? But, honestly, the truth is that while I cared in my head about these things, I couldn't bother with them myself. I was a busy student. I was on committees. I played several varsity sports at my little college. I had a social life. In many ways, I wanted the government to do work that I might have been doing ... if only on the tiniest micro level.

In case you were not aware, this week we had an election here. I can't vote. They don't allow Canadians a vote ... even nice Canadians. But I could not help myself, and still stayed up until 2 a.m. when they declared a winner. I have to admit that I was a little shocked by the result. I was in Canada last week, and when friends back home asked me about the election, I assured them that the Democratic Party would win in a landslide. (I'm not interested this morning in what you think of either candidate, and it does not matter what I think either. I'm just saying what I expected to happen.)

Once again, there were issues that I cared about, as there are issues that I am sure that you all care about. Judging by many of my friends on Facebook, first with the Cubs winning the World Series, and now with the election, the end must be upon us. Now, understand me, I am not wanting to take sides this morning. Nor am I wanting, in any way, to minimize your feelings about this election. I am just saying that I am aware that this feels apocalyptic to many people. But whatever you are feeling about this time that we are in, I think that our Scriptures speak to our issues as we read ourselves into them this morning.

The book of Isaiah is generally considered by scholars to have three sections, or to be three books knit together by a later editor. Book 1 covers the first 39 chapters of the book and is considered to be from the prophet Isaiah. It covers the time period between the call of Isaiah in approximately 742 BC, in the year that King Uzziah died, which was a prosperous time in both Israel and Judah. This first section also included the time of the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel just 20 years later in 722 by the Assyrians, and the section concludes at the subjugation, but not defeat, of Judah in 701. The northern kingdom of Israel went from being an independent and pretty successful nation to being entirely demolished by the Assyrians in the first section of Isaiah.

My favorite prophet from the Hebrew Bible is Amos. He was a contemporary of Isaiah, and began his ministry in the northern kingdom shortly before Isaiah. The critique of Amos against the northern kingdom of Israel is that they were oppressing the poor, taking advantage of the widows and the aliens in the kingdom. Amos critically calls the rich women of Israel *cows of Bashan*, who oppress the poor and crush the needy. This is the context of Isaiah 12.

Again, so that we get what is going on, I want to remind you of the call of Isaiah in chapter 6. You remember it, I'm sure. Isaiah says: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord ... seated on a throne.* You remember that the angel touched Isaiah's lips with a coal to make them clean, and then Isaiah heard the Lord asking, "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*"—to which Isaiah replied, "*Here I am, send me.*" This is of course familiar ground for most of us who have grown up in the church. But God gives a message to Isaiah to start with, and this is where things go from interesting and kind of fun ... to not very fun at all for Isaiah. Here is what we read right after the call of Isaiah, beginning in chapter 6, verse 9: *He said, "Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."* Then I said, "*For how long, Lord?*" And he answered: "*Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.*" (NIV)

The same kind of judgment we see in Amos occurs also in Isaiah 9 and 10 as God speaks to the prophet about the arrogance the Israelites were showing, and their oppression. Listen to chapter 10, verses 1 through 4: *Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.* (NIV)

The prophets of the mid-8th century brought a clear and hard message of judgment because the people of Israel were failing miserably at loving God and at loving and taking care of others. But the words of judgment are usually mingled with a word of hope. It is in chapter 9 of Isaiah that we have this messianic word: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who have lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

Chapter 11 is full of the promise of a peaceful kingdom and the promise of a joyous remnant of Israel and Judah who will return from exile. In our second reading, from Isaiah 12, we find a joyful hymn celebrating a coming day of deliverance, which will follow the days of defeat and exile. This includes the message to trust and not be afraid, to look to God for strength and salvation, to make known God's deeds among the nations. This was a message to God's people who were about to endure a great misery. Whether it feels like a time of joy or a time of misery for you right now, we do need to be reminded to turn to God for strength and salvation. I think that this segues nicely with both of our New Testament texts.

The New Testament contains two letters written to the Christians living in Thessalonica. This was a church founded by Paul, but we read in Acts that Paul and his fellow missionaries were chased out of this town, and ultimately out of Macedonia, before they felt that they had done enough teaching of these new Christians. In 1st Thessalonians the emphasis is on keeping these young Christians focused; there is a lot of focus on Christ's second coming. 2nd Thessalonians may or may not have been written by Paul—scholars do not know. But the letter finds these young Christians living in a time of persecution. The point of the letter is to encourage them with a message that the present ugliness that they are going through will not last forever—that the Day of the Lord will come, and then their afflictions will come to an end.

The section of the letter assigned to us today is a really practical message to the Thessalonians about the way they are to live. The concern here in this letter seems very much like the situation in American evangelicalism a century ago. This was a time when the teaching of premillennial instantaneous rapture theology became popular in America. My youth was plagued by songs like, "Life was filled with guns and wars and everyone was trampled on the floor, I wish we'd all been ready ... there's no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you've been left behind." It is a pie-in-the-sky theology that ignores the brokenness of this world ... that often ignores the message throughout the Scriptures that we are called to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind ... and love our neighbor as ourselves. (As for who our neighbor is, Jesus picks the Samaritan, the person most likely to offend his audience, as the example of what it means to love our neighbor.)

Evangelicalism in America had always had a bent towards serving the world. Before the late 19th century, the prevailing theology was that the world would continue to get better until Christ returns to usher in the millennial Kingdom. Our task was to be partners with God in building God's Kingdom, working to minister to the world around us in very practical ways. Rapture theology split the evangelical movement. Many (not all) who

bought into the rapture theology, and this idea that we are in the last days, took their focus off of social ills of society to focus on preaching. The idea, best expressed by D.L. Moody in the late 19th century, is that salvation is a boat, and our primary responsibility is to get as many in the boat as we can before Christ returns.

From the tenor of this letter, we can see that at least some of the Thessalonians were thinking, “The Day of the Lord will come any day, why bother with ... anything? I have my ticket to heaven. I’m a good church-going, practicing evangelical Christian. Jesus, come back and rescue me from this evil world and take me home!”

The author of this letter is not amused. There is more than a challenge in these words. This is at least at the level of a hand slap. Quit being lazy. Get off your butts. Earn a living, but more important than that, *do not be weary in doing what is right*.

These are good words for us today, no matter what you might have thought about the last couple weeks. The Cubbies won the World Series, and now Trump has won the presidency. Honestly, you may feel crushed by the election. You may also feel elated. You may feel like all of these things are a harbinger of the end times. You may feel like America is finally on the road to becoming great again ... like a certain country to the North (!). No matter what you may be feeling, I think the message we can take and apply today is that, as Christians, we have a call and a responsibility not to be lazy, not to rest, fat and happy, because we have our ticket to heaven. No, we have a call in these days to actively find ways to serve the poor and the widow, the marginalized and the oppressed. This is one integral aspect of what it means to be Kingdom people ... to be Christian ... loving God and loving others, and not becoming weary, or bored, or distracted from doing what is right. May this become ever more the case in my life, in our lives, in our church, and in the world.