

The Poem: Subversion and Summons

Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 3:1-12

Walter Brueggemann
Cincinnati, Ohio

Adults have always known that critical thinking is the best way to manage our life. Adults, since Plato, have learned to trust reason and proceed reasonably with their lives. Adults, since Aristotle, have preferred syllogistic logic that makes things certain. Adults, since the ancient Greeks have, by reason, logic, and critical thinking, been able to reduce reality to a memo, a syllogism, a syllabus, a brief. The Romans took over this Geek way to adulthood and combined it with ruthless power to accomplish control and wealth and security.

In latter days, we in the United States have replicated Rome with our practice of memo, syllogism, syllabus, and brief...together with raw power. We have found our way to wealth, security, and control. And to sustain that way in the world, we have founded great universities to champion critical thinking, reason, and logic. How is that for a quick summary of Western civilization?!

I.

Except this! Mostly unnoticed and not taken seriously, mostly under the radar in this adult world of control and order, there have been Jews. For the most part Jews have not committed to reason and logic and memo and syllogism and brief. Because the Jews came with their peculiar stories of odd moments of transformation, all about emancipation and healing and feeding and newness, all under the rubric of "miracle." And behind the stories there were poems...lyrical, elusive, eruptive, defiant. Jews have known from the outset that a commitment to memo and syllogism will not make things new. Jews have known all along that in poetry we can do things not permitted by logic or reason, because poems never try to sound like memos. Poetry will break the claims of the memo. Poetry will open the world beyond reason. Poetry will give access to contradictions and tensions that logic must deny. Poetry will not only remember; it will propose and conjure and wonder and imagine and foretell.

So Jews, in their covenantal fidelity, did poems. Miriam did poetry when they crossed out of Egyptian slavery. Deborah did poetry when it dawned on them that the Canaanites were not so formidable. Hannah did poetry when little Samuel was born. Eventually Mary did poetry when she found out she was pregnant. All these mothers in Israel celebrated the impossible that was right before their eyes, even though they could explain none of it. They did poetry while the hard men were still parsing logic and writing memos to each other and drafting briefs. I propose that Advent is a time of struggle between the poem that opens the future that God will work and the memo that keeps control. Advent is a time for relinquishing some of the control in order to receive the impossible from God.

II.

Well, not just any poem. After the mothers in Israel there came the other poets, the ones we call "prophets." They turned the poetry toward the future, never doubting that God would give new futures out beyond our memos. The book of Isaiah,

complex as it is, is framed by poetry. The poems of Isaiah are about the future God will yet give. At the beginning of Isaiah, in chapter 2, there is this poem:

In days to come...
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)

It is an imaging out beyond our posturing in power through which we will never prevail. At the end of Isaiah, in chapter 65, there is this poem:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight. (vv. 17-18)

The poet anticipates, against all the data, that there will be no more infant mortality and no more economic displacement:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days....
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat. (vv. 20, 22)

And finally, a peaceable creation with no oil spills:

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
The lion shall eat straw like the ox;...
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. (v. 25)

It is promised! It is imagined! It is proposed! Surely the memo writers did not pause; but the poem lingered. The book of Isaiah moves from “not learn war any more” in chapter 2 to “not hurt or destroy” in chapter 65, a sweep of well-being that contradicts the facts on the ground.

III.

And right in the middle of this poetry, in chapter 11, is the poem entrusted to us on this Advent Sunday. It is a poem that refuses the facts on the ground and invites us listeners to watch for newness outside our constricted, frightened logic. It begins with this that takes our breath away: “Out of the stump of Jesse...,” Jesse being David’s father. David’s family and dynasty run out in failure, no king, no future, no royal possibility, only a stump. But, says the poet, the stump will produce a shoot, a shoot of new life that was not expected. The memo writers no doubt were at work thinking how to honor the stump and close down that history. But the poet said, “Watch for the shoot,” the new David, the new possibility of shalom. The poem that follows is

about that shoot that cannot be explained by our reason.

What a shoot it will be, conjured by the poet! This new ruler to come, only imagined here, will have qualifications like you have never seen, wisdom (not mere knowledge), understanding (not just data), wisdom and understanding from the Lord, fear of the Lord, recognition of the holy mystery that is at the core of the power process. This new shoot will be glad to sign on for God's promises. Like every ruler, he must sort things out and make economic decisions. He will decide with righteousness on behalf of the poor. He will break the monopoly of the power elite and will notice that other neglected public. He will rule for the meek, the ones who have no voice and no political clout and no smart lawyers. He will be all dressed up in robes of covenantal fidelity, and he will not forget what his vocation is.

The poem requires us to take a deep breath, because it is reality defining. What we usually have is authority with knowledge but no wisdom, with data but no understanding, the kind of power that governs on behalf of the billionaire club, so that the rich get richer. And now comes a poem of the new incursion of God's spirit that will break open the cabal of the critical control.

But there is more. The poet takes a long pause. Since we are already into God's impossibilities, the big impossibility is lined out:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (vv. 6-7)

The old enmities, the old appetites of the food chain, the old assumptions of the survival of the meanest, all of that is subverted. The wild will not stay vicious, because the coming one, marked by righteousness and justice, will overrule raw power in the interest of new possibility. Finally, the young child will toy with the asp and the adder; nobody will get hurt, because the poison will be removed from the world. The poison will be gone because the shoot will override all business as usual. All will be well, and all manner of thing will be well:

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (v. 9)

The poem is about advent, about the coming one. And we dare to say, we confessing Christians, that the poem concerns the Christmas baby who refuses Rome's rule of force and religion's rule of code, opening the world to healing, freedom, forgiveness, and joy. So try this in advent. Depart from logic and memo and syllogism, and host the poem.

IV.

But there is an important caveat about the poem. Those who listened to John the

Baptist, the big advent guy, loved the poem. They thought they owned the poem. They thought they had the poem as a special promise just to them. It is the temptation of entitled people to think we have privilege about the poem. So John addresses them, calls them seething, slippery, creepy reptiles, low-lives. And he says to them: Don't just enjoy the poem. Do the poem. Sign on!

Bear fruit worthy of repentance....Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:8, 10)

This is the bite of advent. It is not just marveling at newness God will give. It is not about cozy, comfortable hope. It turns out, as always among Jews, that the poem is a summons to action. In these days of advent, then, imagine if the poem is true. Imagine if the poem is the true text of our life. What then?

Well, be a carrier of wisdom and not just knowledge;
be an agent of understanding, and not just data.
Take on "the fear of the Lord," a sense that there is an "out beyond us"
who finally governs.
Watch for the poor and make a difference with them;
watch for the meek and be a voice for the voiceless.
Embrace the lamb and summon the wolf to newness;
enfold the kid and deal with the leopard;
watch for the hissing snake and notice the end of the poison.
And watch for the child:

The little child will lead them...
wolf and lamb,
leopard and kid,
calf and lion,
cow and bear,
lion and ox.
The nursing child will play over the hole of the asp.

The poem anticipates the child. And when he is born, we should not be preoccupied with memos and logic and brief and critical thought. Because the child...and the poem...evoke a leap beyond our control. It is a leap to another world that requires daily obedience. And it ends...the poem ends...this way:

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (v. 9)

That end of the poem is our beginning, beginning beyond memo and brief and syllogism. It is a world that began in the Jerusalem temple, ran through Bethlehem, and breaks open among us. Watch for the little child!