

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
First Sunday of Advent – November 27, 2016 – HOPE
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Isaiah 2:1-5

For Reflection

“It is true that all of us are the beneficiaries of crimes committed by our ancestors, and it is true that nothing can be done about that now because the victims are dead and the survivors are innocent. These are good reasons for keeping our mouths shut about the past: but tell me, what are our reasons for silence about atrocities still to come?”

— Damon Knight, One Side Laughing: Stories Unlike Other Stories

“How you correct your mistakes will define your character and commitment to a higher power.”

— Shannon L. Alder

Restitution

Rosh Hashanah (Hebrew for “beginning of the year”) is the Jewish New Year, usually celebrated in early autumn in the northern hemisphere. It is the “traditional anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve... and their first actions toward the believed realization of humanity’s role in G-d’s world.” (Wikipedia)

It aligns with the beginning of agricultural cycles – sowing seeds and bringing harvest. It is also referred to in the Mishnah as “the day of judgment.” Three books of account are opened – into which the fate of the wicked, the righteous and the intermediate are recorded. “The names of the righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life... The intermediate class are allowed a respite of ten days, until Yom Kippur, to reflect, repent and become righteous; the wicked are blotted out of the book of the living forever.” (Wikipedia)

There are sins against G-d which must be repented and appeal made to G-d for forgiveness – which is bestowed on Yom Kippur. And there are sins against fellow humans which must be repaired; restitution and reconciliation must be achieved in order to be counted among the righteous on Yom Kippur.

The Christian New Year is today – the first Sunday of Advent. It is intended to mark the coming of Light in the Darkness. It is a ritual that encourages Hope in desperate times. Advent falls in the midst of Light celebrations in many other traditions -----
Diwali: the fall Hindu celebration of light;
Solstice: the Wiccan celebration of shortest day of the year but also the day when the sun begins to return;

Hannukah: the Jewish celebration of the miracle of one night's lamp oil burning for eight days (among other things);
Kwanzaa: the modern African American celebration of community values and the light that continues to burn in the hearts and lives of our families;
And there is our Christmas festival declaring the newborn Christ as the Light of the World.

Advent is a season of expectation and hope. And we tend to reserve our season of repentance, restitution and judgment for Lent – commemorating the last weeks and days of the life of Jesus. Lent then culminates on Easter with the Resurrection story and (traditionally) the baptism and reception of new members. Our “Yom Kippur” – “Easter” – named for the Goddess of Dawn “Oestre” – is also a salvation day – a day of new life and new chances to be the people G-d intends for us to be. Easter is our “book of everlasting life.”

However, there is nothing in writing that prohibits us from doing some of our Lenten practices during Advent. Being open to the traditions of other religions and cultures – and being “progressive” – can we say “flexible”? Christians – we can take this season of darkness and light to heart. We can engage in self-reflection and correction. We can take an account of the wrongs we have committed against others – large or small, historical or current, personal or communal – and seek to rectify our mistakes, restore our relationships.

As I read up on the concept of restitution – returning resources and power to those from whom it has been stolen – I discovered writings by Dr. Amos Wilson, African American scholar, psychologist, social theorist (1941-1995). He believed (as many of us have come to understand) that we can have a society where people no longer overtly expressed racial hatred and certain behaviors are outlawed – but still have a system that destroys millions of Black people.

“Racism and white supremacy is in the very structures and values of the institutions of the society itself. And until you revolve and change those structures and attitudes and values, you will always be under the bottom...[even if] white people expressed no hatred toward you.”

— Dr. Amos Wilson, *Moving Beyond White Supremacy: Civil Rights Toward Revolution*

In the wake of this last election cycle when certain racist language and behaviors have come rushing into the light, we have no choice but to respond in ways that go beyond pushing those attitudes back into their swamps and closets. We, as people of faith (whatever that faith is) have a mandate to tear down, reconstruct, transform our social structures so that they are inherently just. And that work includes the work of restitution. I quote from Dr. Wilson again:

Justice requires not only the ceasing and desisting of injustice but also requires either punishment or reparation for injuries and damages inflicted for prior

wrongdoing. The essence of justice is the redistribution of gains earned through the perpetration of injustice. If restitution is not made and reparations not instituted to compensate for prior injustices, those injustices are in effect rewarded.

And the benefits such rewards conferred on the perpetrators of injustice will continue to "draw interest," to be reinvested, and to be passed on to their children, who will use their inherited advantages to continue to exploit the children of the victims of the injustices of their ancestors. Consequently, injustice and inequality will be maintained across the generations as will their deleterious social, economic, and political outcomes.

— Dr. Amos Wilson, African American scholar, psychologist, social theorist (1941-1995)

My hope is that with the support and accountability of this Beloved Community, we can come up with some meaningful ways to make restitution – to transform social structures – even if these ways are small. Justice and kindness, like seeds, grow into something much larger than themselves.

And as you begin to reflect on specific ways that we might enact restitution, I will leave you with a true story – taken from our own sordid history. It is a history that seems to be rearing its ugly head again at Standing Rock – as law enforcement holds siege against the Lakota tribe – and corporations continue to destroy their sacred lands and waters in the name of profit.

The year was 1877. The month was October. What were called the “Indian wars of the Northwest” were coming to an end. Chief Joseph of the Wallowa Band of the Nez Perce had led his people in a desperate 1500-mile attempt to reach Canada. They fell thirty miles short, blocked by the troops of General Howard at the Bear Paw Mountains.

According to the best-known account of the Nez Perce surrender, Chief Joseph rode into General Howard’s camp and offered his rifle. His surrender speech has become a classic of American oratory. A portion of it was recorded as follows:

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. It is cold and we have no blankets. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.

In and of themselves, these words are poignant and tragic. But there is more to the story.

The officer who recorded those words was General Howard’s aide-de-camp, a young man named C.E.S. Wood. Wood was moved by Chief Joseph and his speech and – through the years that followed – he and the chief developed a relationship of mutual respect and friendship. Wood sent his son, Erskine, to live

with Chief Joseph and learn from him. Over seventy years later, as an old man, Erskine would recall that “Joseph took me into his tipi and into his heart and treated me as a son. We ate together, hunted together, slept together. I can say truthfully, knowing him was the highlight of my entire life.”

But along with those happy memories was to come a deep regret. Erskine Wood’s father told him to ask Joseph if there was a gift he could offer the chief in return for the hospitality the chief had shown his son. Erskine asked the question and Chief Joseph replied that he would really like a fine stallion to improve his herd. But Erskine never reported this back to his father. He thought Joseph was a great man, who deserved much more than a horse. So he said nothing.

Later, he came to regret his action and his family said that he frequently spoke of this regret in his later years. It was a simple mistake, a great sadness, one which would haunt Wood to his death at the age of 104.

In 1997 C.E.S. Wood’s great-granddaughter, Mary Wood, who had heard this story since her childhood, decided to do something about it. She located the closest lineal descendant of Chief Joseph, a man named Keith Soy Redthunder.

She discovered to her amazement that Redthunder and others of the Chief Joseph Clan had just decided to begin a new breeding program, to produce a uniquely Nez Perce breed of horses, and they were looking for a stallion. Mary found some 60 Wood relatives who contributed the money to purchase a magnificent young black and white Appaloosa. And on July 27 of that year the two families met in the Wallowa Valley.

Wood descendants from all over the country stood next to Nez Perce from the Colville, Lapwai, Umatilla and Whitebird Clans. The brilliant writer Scott Momaday spoke to the gathering.

And then Keith Soy Redthunder said:

I didn’t know how to take it. I think Indian people are always skeptical at first. I don’t think we can look back and say that the white man’s word was worth anything. Treaties written down were never fulfilled. A word spoken ten years ago is likely forgotten ... Yet this one family can turn around and fulfill spoken words between two people more than 100 years old. To make those words good now is an extraordinary thing.

Mary Wood spoke on behalf of her family:

This endeavor of ours was motivated by sadness, by the regret that had been passed down in our family. But amazingly, the sadness has turned to joy. Today I feel that this horse was not meant to be given 100 years ago. It was

a gift that our ancestors left us, to have this opportunity a century later to renew this relationship. Their regret was in fact their gift to us.

- Beth Hege Piatote, "A Circle of Words," Oregon Quarterly 77:3 (Spring 1998), 19-23
As retold by Joey Jeter, Sermon "The Word Made Good" (a few edits from agc 3-13-05)

Scripture Reading for Sunday November 27, 2016 – Advent 1 – Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5

1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 **He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples;** 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.

5 O house of Jacob, come, **let us walk in the light of the LORD!**

HOPE

Penelope read this one

Hope Is The Thing With Feathers

by Emily Dickinson

'Hope' is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chillest land—
And on the strangest Sea—

Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of Me.

Still I Rise
by Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.

Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors
gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the
slave.

I rise
I rise
I rise.