

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
November 30, 2008 – First Sunday in Advent

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Isaiah 35: 1-10

“Restore”

Restoration. Taking something old – something worn-out or dingy or broken and making it as good as new again. We do it with furniture, and buildings, and works of art. Do you remember when the Sistine Chapel was being restored? How long it took, and how breathtaking the results? After so many centuries had gone by, even the experts assumed Michelangelo had intended his paintings to be dark. But the restorers proved them wrong: underneath all those layers of grime were bold, brilliant, lovely colors. Severance Hall was restored not so long ago -- and every time I enter that place I marvel at its beauty. Restoring old buildings is a major undertaking. Restoration doesn't happen overnight. A lot of time and effort and money and elbow grease goes into the work of restoration.

We restore old things. God restores creation. God restores communities. God restores human lives. That is our Advent message for today. God in Christ is coming into the world to restore and make all things new. From parched earth to shriveled up lives. From desert highways to lonely hearts. From ancient Israel's returning from exile to modern nations in the process of restoring their relationships with other nations. Whenever hearts are broken and dreams shattered and hope lost and confidence shaken, God is at work, healing and mending and reconciling and restoring.

Consider the impact Isaiah's words must have had on his first listeners! The kingdom of Israel had long been something of the past. And even then its greatness had lasted only so briefly. After Solomon, it really had been one long, steady decline until first the north and then the south went down in defeat. But even when the southern nation of Judah's exile in Babylon ended, things were never the same again. The northern 10 tribes were scattered forever. And not all of the 2 southern tribes returned either. Judah was never the great powerful nation it had once been. The Hebrew people were not the cohesive covenant community they once were. Jews were now scattered all over the Mediterranean world. The promised land was no longer their exclusive domain.

And the faithful remembered their past. They knew the story of their deliverance and their disobedience. And they couldn't help but wonder what lay in store for them. And so the years went by. And then comes this word:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Can you imagine their surprise, their amazement, their overwhelming sense of awe and wonder? To be told that their future is not forever bleak after all, that the glory of Zion will not only be a memory for the few but a reality for many? That miracles will happen again, that God will come and save? Can you hear their sighs of relief? Can you feel the weight of their despair begin to lift?

Wait, maybe after all these years, you've hardened a little. Maybe you're just a bit cynical about such things. Maybe it takes more than a prophet's few good words to convince you that things are really going to be different.

And believe me, I know where you're coming from. There are plenty of good reasons for us to be suspicious. In some ways we're like all those experts who challenged the Sistine Chapel restoration project. We've grown so accustomed to the way things are in our world that it's hard to believe it was ever meant to be any different. The layers of hunger and hatred and greed and violence and pollution have been building up for so long that we can't imagine there's anything good underneath them all.

One of the headline stories since the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India concerned the effect these attacks will have on the recent progress toward reconciliation between India and Pakistan. As New York Times reporter Jane Perlez summarizes: "India's security agencies believed that the multiple attacks in Mumbai were by an Islamic militant group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, operating out of Pakistan. If India discovers that the Inter-Services-Intelligence agency is connected to the Mumbai attacks, the slightly warmer relationship that has been fostered between the neighbors would no doubt return to a deep freeze. And that may have partly been the motivation of whoever carried out the attacks."

The suicide bombing that occurred this week at the Shiite mosque in a small town outside Baghdad killed 12 people who were among the 700 gathered for Friday prayers in preparation for a peaceful march to protest the Iraqi Parliament's ratification Thursday of a new security agreement with the United States. Mussayib is predominantly a Shiite town, with a number of Sunni villages nearby. And before the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, its mosque was a Sunni mosque which was then taken over by Shiites.

Are we surprised that whenever any moves toward some kind of peace or at least some kind of reconciliation are made, there are those who oppose those moves and will do whatever they can to sabotage them? Whenever there's a little bit of good news, bad news is never out of the picture. That's the way things are, have been, and always will be. So we've learned to be suspicious of anyone who claims to promise too much. We never take good news at face value. We're always looking for the catch, or the hidden agenda, or the fine print. "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is" -- that's the wisdom we live by.

So what do we do with these grandiose prophecies from Isaiah? How do we live through these weeks of Advent? How do we approach the manger in Bethlehem?

“Behold, I am making all things new,” says our God. “Restore us again, O God of our salvation,” prays the community of believers. “Restore us again.”

God’s promises are not pie-in-the-sky dreams. They really aren’t. And what I wish for you as this season of Advent begins is that you’ll take this promise of restoration for what it is: an olive branch offering of hope, a measure of good faith, a down-payment, so to speak, on the future – and that you’ll mull this promise over in your head and let it sink into your thought and prayers and somehow let it flow through your veins and dwell in your heart. The way things are is not necessarily the way things are meant to be. Grime and filth and even cynicism can be removed, little by little, layer by layer, day by day, one moment at a time

“The desert will rejoice and blossom. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” These are not empty promises. These are not meaningless words, signifying nothing. God speaks words of life. God gives hope. God promises restoration.

Think about your life. What rooms need to be restored? What dry deserts cry out for water? What broken relationships need the touch of healing and the kiss of peace?

Think about this church, this community, this fellowship. Are we singing with gladness? Do we see the glory of the Lord?

Think of all the world’s people – what weak hands need strengthening? Whose blind eyes need opening? Whose fearful hearts need assurance?

I cannot live without hope. I need something to look forward to. And I need God’s steady hand on my shoulder as I head into the future. “It’s alright,” that hand tells me. “I’ll be with you. Go ahead – do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.”

Fear of the future paralyzes us. So does nostalgia for the past. We can’t just live in yesterday nor can we just live for today. How do we get to tomorrow? By hope. With trust. In assurance that the restoration God promises will one day come true.

Think of Advent as a hinge that joins the old and the new together. We are anchored in the past -- yesterday’s dreams are not forgotten. Our memories still feed and sustain us. The ancient stories are still told and lived. But we are also attached to the future. When tomorrow comes, when God’s promises are fulfilled, we will be part of that story, too. Our future is not empty. God has new things in store for us. And hope makes the hinge bend back and forth. Advent hope is all about remembering a baby boy born long ago on winter’s night in Bethlehem, and about anticipating a day of glory to come. We can’t just do the remembering. Christmas isn’t just something that happened in the past.

The Christmas story is about us, too -- and the hope of restoration it offers is the hope for our lives and our future. Believe that with all your heart. Can you? Will you? Let the layers of cynicism be wiped off. Set your doubts aside. Hear with new ears the good news of salvation. See with new eyes the flowers that blossom in the desert. Be restored once again as God's people, as God's people of hope, as God's people of the promise. Come to Zion with singing. And wear everlasting joy upon your heads. Amen.