

Because this sermon lacked the festive spirit, I decided to write and deliver another.

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 8, 1989

Texts Isaiah 42:1-7
Psalm 45:7-9
Acts 10:34-38
St. Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The prophet Isaiah often speaks of the whole tone of a time as the song of that time. The Lord has become my song and my salvation, means that God has intervened and given us a new song to sing in the place of the old song.

This became understandable to me when I learned the little verse about Fathers and sons and the family patterns that exist. I have to clean it up a bit:

Like Father like son,
same song, just the second verse
a little bit louder, a little bit worse.

Actually the line includes "damned" second verse, and perhaps that has to stay in, because the damned keep turning circles in the same destructive pattern. It is accepting God's salvation that makes it possible to sing a new song.

The generation of alcoholics usually illustrate this verse. The fathers and sons of many generations all have the same inner defect, and all cover it and cope with it by drinking. Each son says, I'll never be like my father, and each one succeeds only in becoming another verse, a little louder and a little worse.

Who is able to rescue us from this body of death? St. Paul says: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Romans 7.v.25. It is God alone who can break this vicious circle and thrust us up into a new song, into a trust in God that has become a living force in our lives.

In the same way the little verse holds true for whole countries, for nations and empires of peoples. Captive Israel, captive Judah asks "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" This is in Psalm 137. For in Babylon, "...our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, 'sing to us one of the songs of Zion!' (v.3-4.) And the whole song of their exile was changed when God made a highway through the desert, a new exodus for his chosen people, so they returned to Judea and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and restored the temple. The new song overcame the old song of oppression, injustice and imprisonment with freedom, return, ownership, fulfilling and abundant life.

Those who do not understand the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them. (George Santayana) And we are into the old song so much more than we know, and we stand in such dread need of redemption. Reading about the 40,000 babies that die each year in the African country of the Camaroons, knowing about the dreadful toll on life that the dying Apartheid regime

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is placing on Black South Africans, on the bombing of the Pan Am 103 flight, on the horror of the wars in Afganistan, Iraq and Iran, Nicaragua, El Salvador.... the whole plight of the Latin American countries and the developing countries as such, where the people see the gap growing ever more wide, and the question about better conditions now as opposed to twenty years ago has to be answered sadly: it has all taken a terrible turn for the worse! It is the same old song, and we seem to be locked into it but good.

The magnitude of the problems our little world is facing are staggering. And I hold a book before me with the Stuttgart Declaration of guilt written by conscience stricken Germans after World War II and the horrors of the Nazi Regime.

"We accuse ourselves that we didn't witness more courageously, pray more faithfully, believe more joyously, love more ardently....

We hope in God that through the joint service of the churches the spirit of violence and revenge, that begins again today to become powerful, may be controlled, and the spirit of peace and love come to command, the (spirit) in which tortured humanity can find healing.

So we pray in a time when the whole world needs a new beginning: 'veni creator spiritus'!"

(p.533, C. Manschreck, A History of Christianity)

What happened in the period of World War II was devastating enough, but to think we are still singing the same song, and another verse is happening which will be a little bit louder and a little worse, is hard to think about.

Therefore let us look to our Lord who was baptized, and over whom the heavens opened, and God declared: "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

To be the Son of God in the living force of trusting God which has come to us from the Hebrews, means that we are talking about the Messiah. This means an enthronement of the one to whom all the kings of the earth will one day have to come and then bowing low present their tribute and pay homage. That is the signficance of the Three Kings, of Epiphaney. This is the one who will spread trust in God as a living force among the peoples of the nations. And out of this trust will come positive signs of justice.

In a program about banks, it was shown how community agencies could prevent Big Banks from expanding, by hitting them with the Community Reinvestment Act. Banks receive their charters because they could demonstrate they served the needs of their community: that they cashed the checks, gave loans and credit, etc. Now it turned out if a bank was in a community and had red-lined that community, then they could be taken to court. It turned out that the banks had refused to cash checks, leaving the people at the mercy of check-cashing places, that could charge as much as 20% of the check amount to cash it! That banks gave no loans leaving the people at the mercy of loan-sharks and Pawnshop brokers. In the struggle with a bank in Philadelphia, the bank first really resented the action against them brought by the

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Kensington Neighborhood Committee. They would not meet with the bankers in their sleek offices, but insisted the negotiations take place right in the rundown and red-lined area. The bankers were furious, but the group wanted to show them what a red-lined area really looked like, what abandoned houses looked like that could not get any mortgages nor loans. And lo and behold, the banks started helping by opening its services to this neighborhood through this agency and renewal began in that area of Philly. One person stated that social work help kept the people dependent, while financial help made the people independent. And the bank president explained how he had learned to trust the community leaders, and how it gave their bank a new vision of service, which was very profitable to them. First they thought the people only wanted to put their hands into the bankers' pockets. Then they realized they were only guiding them into doing better business because they began to meet the needs of a whole other market of people.

That long illustration shows how ways and means are really present to bring about more justice: but we have to witness more courageously, pray more fervently, believe more joyously, etc.. And there are ways to bring hope, now not to the coastlands, but to the furthest most developing countries. If we want to continue giving leadership to the world, as we have been proud to do since WWII, we have to stop defining the world in military terms, and selling arms to poor countries that need anything but another war, especially a war with the horrendous weapons we are selling them. Let's get more quality into our products that we want to sell, products that help people and support a better way of life. The better the quality of a weapon, the more lives it can destroy. And the world does not need new high tech mega weapons today, it needs some real thought and concern for the environmental catastrophes upon the earth. We need some real creativity in how to save the Third World developing countries and give them some hope of having a future.

You realize that the Son, who is the Messiah, turns the tables. We who have all the hope, he gives no hope. They who have no hope right now will inherit the earth.

There need be no crying out. We need not lift our voices hysterically. No bull-horns blasting in the street. We need not get discouraged. It is not Reagan, nor Bush, nor Gorbachev nor any worldly leader who gives us this vision and this spirit. It is the King of Kings to whom all knees shall bow on Earth, in heaven and under the Earth until convinced by his love, all tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

This God who created the heavens and the earth can bring us to recreate them. Following this Lamb of God makes for a new world, a new day...and God will give new breath to the people, a new spirit so we walk in it - rather that go to church with it and then walk in our every day lives outside of this spirit.

Read from verses 6-7 of Isaiah.

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Don't say this is political. Don't say what has this got to do with us? Don't say this is not practical, this is a sermon for people in Washington, but not for us little people here in St. Paul's. When we think only of ourselves and our own country's problems, then we are still isolated in our selfishness. We have to learn about what is happening in the rest of the world. A Russian poet wrote:

A tear, which evaporated somewhere in Paraguay,
will fall as a snowflake
onto the frozen cheeks of an Eskimo. (Yevtushenko)

We have to wake up in our country, and thank God signs of our waking up begin to appear. If we keep on in our ignorance about what we are doing in the world, we will not be isolated by our ignorance, but by the fact that the whole world will isolate and reject us - a horrible hatred for us is growing over the world-- so we have to repent. We have to take on a new direction. The churches have to take the cue of their Lord and bring the vision of the new time, where we sing to the Lord a new song, because God in Christ has become our salvation, and Christ is teaching us this new song so that we all become changed.

The churches are not countries, but they are the vision of what we can bring in Good News to this world, and to the poor fellow refusing to enter a homeless shelter in Coney Island, to whole peoples caught in the despair of hunger, famine and poverty. Let's climb out of our crime and into God's miracles. Let's look to ones who have the light of the nations and make these new ways become our new ways. If only Russia had not crushed Dubchec these 20 years ago. They were about the same reforms Gorbachev is introducing now. Now it may well be too late for Russia. The Checks could have shown them the way. Too bad we killed Allende in Chile. With him the Latin American countries could have had some hope. He could have shown the United States a thing or two. But we went in and crushed him, leaving the people at the mercy of a cruel general who ground the back into the dark ages. Now Latin America is doing a chemical war against us - and we are losing the battle. Let us follow the Christ who will lead us on to the way we can go. Amen.