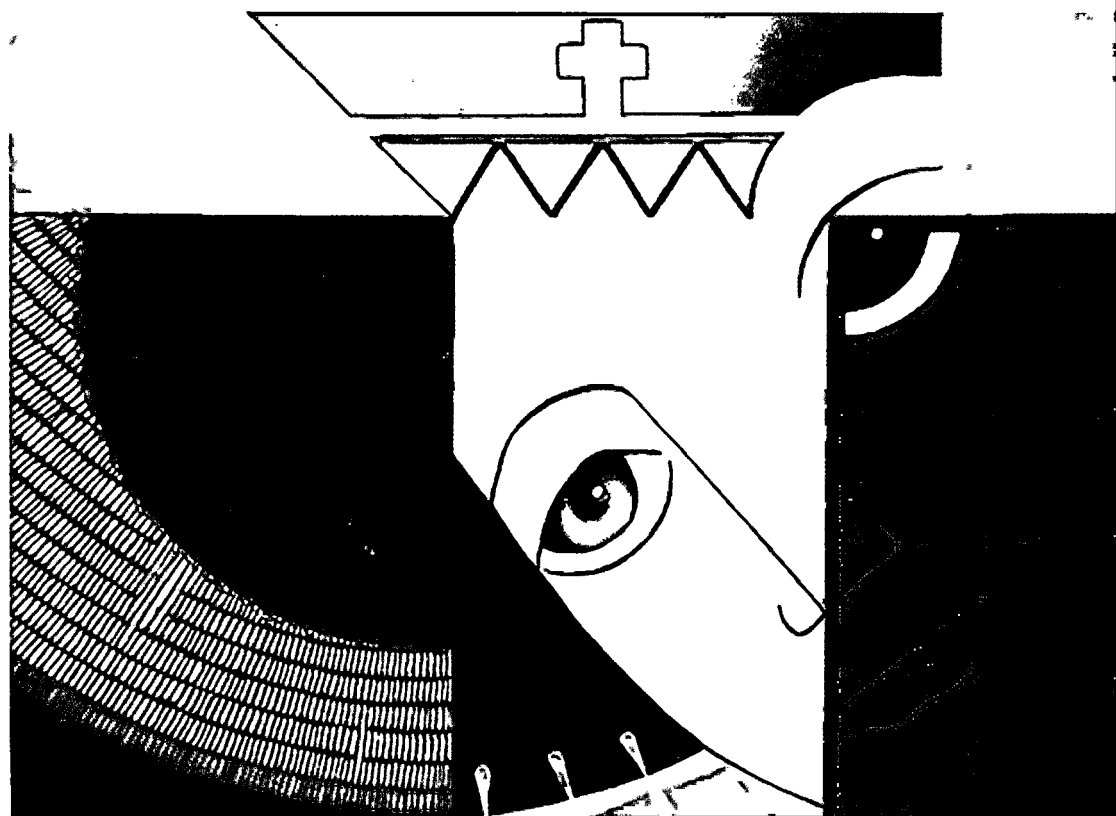


PREACHING GOD'S TRANSFORMING JUSTICE

A LECTIONARY COMMENTARY, YEAR C
FEATURING 22 NEW HOLY DAYS FOR JUSTICE



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A Lectionary Commentary, Year C

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DEC 10 2012

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10)

Christine Marie Smith

LEVITICUS 25:1-17

PSALM 33:10-22

JAMES 2:1-7

MATTHEW 20:1-16

In the shadow of World War II, the United Nations set forth the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. This document asserts that all human beings are free, equal, and entitled to dignity, safety, peace, and security regardless of nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, or religion. It prohibits actions that deny these values (such as slavery, torture, or discrimination). Commemorating it in Advent, the preacher could help the congregation to repent of violations of these rights and to recognize that living by them can be an important component in preparing for the Advent of Christ.

Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts . . . and [call for] the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want (Preamble). All are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of [mutuality] (Article 1). Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being (Article 16).

United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Any preacher who decides to preach about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights during Advent will not find it difficult to connect the great human vision and hope that the creators of this declaration had for a more just and humane world with the eschatological visions and hopes of this season. During Advent we actively await the transformation of our world, and we give

voice to the kind of visions of repentance, hope, and justice that just might help the global human community create such a world.

This Sunday is an important time to remind our religious communities that we do indeed have a global agreement, a global declaration, that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, and that there is still so much work to be done to make this declaration of human rights a reality for all God's people. In this blessed Advent season, preachers are called to proclaim a word of truth and indictment for our human failures to uphold and ensure the basic human rights of all people. If Advent is a season of waiting, then let us have the courage to remind ourselves that millions of people around the globe live in unbearable cycles of waiting: waiting for water and food, waiting for shelter and a place to call home, waiting for an end to daily emotional and physical violence, waiting for just a taste of God's promise of justice. Speaking the truth about the horrible, crushing waiting that the majority of human beings spend a lifetime experiencing could be our humble, heartfelt Advent confession.

Also, it is our responsibility to proclaim words of hope and promise. It is never too late to take action on behalf of most of the human community, who suffer from extreme oppression and injustice and who die unnecessary, heinous deaths while we who are privileged lead lives in which many articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have come to fruition. We need to work for and defend the kind of basic human rights that all people need in order to survive and have some measure of safety, freedom, and dignity. This might be our heartfelt Advent vision.

Leviticus 25:1-17

This section of Leviticus confronts us with a profound vision of how human beings are to live in just relationship with one another and with the land that nourishes and sustains us. The land and all of creation are gifts from God, and human beings are custodians, stewards, temporary residents—no more, no less. God is portrayed so clearly as the ultimate landowner and holder that in verse 23 human beings are declared to be tenants and aliens. Prophetic preaching on this Sunday will surely involve lifting up this wonderfully shocking vision that every Israelite, every human being, has a right to a portion of the land in order to survive and feed one's self and one's family. This proclamation in Leviticus is its own universal declaration of human rights about land, the just ordering of creation, and the survival of all. No one really owns any part of God's creation, nor are those who have economic means entitled to a large portion of the land while others have none. All people, no

matter what their circumstances, have a basic right to fairness and restoration in returning to their original and rightful portion of the land.

There is no hard evidence to suggest that the Israelites ever followed the demanding vision of jubilee described so clearly in this passage, and it is not difficult to imagine why it may never have been accomplished. It would be like every single displaced Guatemalan family returning to their rightful portion of Guatemalan land regardless of whether it is owned by a wealthy landowner or an international corporation. It would look like every family living under temporary tents in Haiti returning to a portion of their own land on which they could survive. It would be like returning to Mexico every single portion of land in the United States that was a part of the original country of Mexico. It would be like the United States erasing massive foreign debt that poor countries have accumulated to benefit the interests of the landed elite of those countries, while that debt enslaves the poor in a poverty cycle that is growing more massive with each and every year. There have been jubilee moments in the history of our global economy, but Leviticus reminds us that the social and economic realities of the Sabbath and of the years of jubilee should be the constant and repeated ordering of God's creation.

Psalm 33:10-22

This psalm is one of praise and gratitude for the steadfast love of God in our individual lives and for God's loving and enduring presence in all of creation. This is the powerful hope that we name and proclaim during the season of Advent. Our Advent hope is that God and human beings together might be able to create a more just world where the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is more than a vision for the future, but is a vision that we can realize in small and great ways in our daily lives and in the lives of people around the globe.

The words of the psalmist remind us that kings and armies, warriors and war horses "cannot save" (vv. 16-17). Only God's redemptive work in the world, incarnated through individuals, communities, and nations, is the kind of power strong enough to stop the endless violation of human rights that surrounds us, and it is God's power and steadfast love that will not let us go until all people have the basic life necessities included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. God is watching humankind (vv. 13-14)! And as abstract as this may seem, God holds us accountable for our sisters and brothers and their well-being if we take it seriously. With the metaphor of God's eye upon us in our hearts and minds (v. 18), let our preaching give an account of our deeds and our actions to the one who fashioned the hearts of us all (v. 15).

Matthew 20:1-16

This parable about the laborers in the vineyard confounds and challenges people of privilege and proclaims a rare word of compassion and justice for those who are poor and without work. It is most often interpreted as a parable of grace or a parable about God's surprising generosity. Perhaps it is a parable about human dignity as well. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there are no "ifs" before any of the thirty articles that articulate the rights of all people. If you do certain things, then you "earn" the right to employment or education. If you are a particular kind of person, or you have certain economic resources, you "earn" your right to freedom of expression and the right to an adequate standard of living that includes housing, medical care, clothing, and food. All you have to be is a human person to be seen as worthy of the same rights as every other person. In this parable there are no "ifs" either. The workers do not have to work the same length of time to be paid a day's living wage. The workers do not have to be lucky enough to be hired early in the day to be paid a day's living wage. All the workers who come to the marketplace looking and hoping for work have the same right to a day's living wage. Many preachers so quickly make the landowner God and the laborers human beings in need of God's grace that we seldom are challenged to consider the economic realities at the heart of this parable. Those of us who are Euro-Americans are so accustomed to competition and a hierarchy of things that make one worthy of being employed, worthy of being paid a living wage, worthy of being treated with dignity, that this parable seems unfair and outrageous. People of privilege assume that they will receive what is greater and of more worth because they are entitled to it. It should shock us as religious people that we are more concerned about what is earned and fair than what is grace-filled and generous.

It would be in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to preach a sermon about the dignity of a day's living wage. Human rights are about material, social, and economic rights and privileges, but human rights are also about preserving the inherent dignity of the human person. Perhaps it is past time for preachers to linger on the fact that each worker went home that night with enough money to feed a family for another day.

James 2:1-7

One of the tenets of Latin American liberation theology is God's preferential option for the poor. For people of privilege, this theological assertion seems nearly unbearable, for God surely loves and cares for all of us with fierce and absolute equality. For the poor, this theological assertion must

feel unbelievably hope-filled and honoring. Until the poor in our world have adequate resources to sustain their lives and restore dignity to their humanity, then God surely is urging and calling all of us in the human family to eradicate injustice, violence, and genocide that bring daily death to the poor. Has this call become one of our primary and deepest religious commitments? A similar principle applies to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Surely God is calling us to struggle for the basic rights of those who have no food, shelter, education, or medical care as our primary and deepest social and economic commitment before we struggle for the right to rest and leisure.

In this passage from James, the writer confronts us with the biases that cause us to give preferential treatment to those who are rich. In the highly stratified social context of the ancient world, James is boldly calling people to be unabashedly biased, all right, but to be biased on the side of those human beings who are poor. The writer of James, like the Latin American liberation theologians of our time, believes in a God who seeks after and chooses the poor as those who deserve and need our human advocacy and activism the most. As preachers, how can we join with members of the religious communities we serve to begin honestly to deconstruct and critique our privileged biases and prejudices that keep us affirming and advocating for the universal rights of the elite at the expense of God's larger family who do not possess even the most basic human rights?