A Light that Rises in the Darkness

5 Epiphany

February 5, 2017

[Isaiah 58:1-9a, [9b-12]](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi5_RCL.html#ot1) [1 Corinthians 2:1-12, [13-16]](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi5_RCL.html#nt1)

[Matthew 5:13-20](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi5_RCL.html#gsp1) [Psalm 112:1-9, (10)](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi5_RCL.html#ps1)

Last week I spoke about a woman, Marianne, whom Barb and I visit each week. Marianne is dying of congestive heart failure.

Marianne sleeps most of the day now; she is quietly and peacefully preparing for the next stage of her journey. Lakota Sioux don’t say someone dies; they say that he or she has walked on. Although Marianne can no longer stand, she is getting ready to walk on.

This past Friday I visited her. She was lying in her hospice bed and was kind of awake. I set my Communion kit down, scooched a chair closer to her, sat down, and asked her if she would like to receive Communion.

She barely moved her head or lips, but I could tell she had said “Yes.” So I opened the kit and got out the pyx, the small round metal container that holds consecrated wafers. I broke off a tiny piece of wafer and held it towards her. From somewhere she found the strength to open her hand, receive the wafer, and put it in her mouth.

I could tell she was having trouble swallowing, so instead of offering her a sip of wine I gave her a small bottle of water with a straw. She drank some water. I took the bottle from her, and she immediately fell asleep.

When I reached down to put the pyx back, I noticed only then that the Communion kit was sitting next to a catheterized pack of Marianne’s urine.

I knew that what I saw in that moment was important, but I didn’t know why. Later that day, sitting outside on the patio, enjoying the unexpected February warmth, and listening to the patio fountain plash and play, I understood.

When we talk about Christ’s body and blood, we need to remember that with these sacraments come hospice beds, feces, and urine. This may be a tough lesson for us, but the truth is you can’t have Christ without also having Marianne. She represents all of us. She *is* each and every one of us.

And this is why the sacred is political.

Marianne receives benefits under the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare. Because of the close proximity of that Communion kit and that bag of urine, she has come to represent for me the many, many poor in Kern County, children of God, who receive subsidized health care.

The UC Berkeley Labor Center says that nearly 11 percent of Kern County residents, more than 95,000 low-income adults, will lose their Medi-Cal coverage if the Affordable Care Act is repealed. The research adds that 88,000 residents in the county who have obtained coverage since 2013 may return to being uninsured. The *LA Times* has reported that nearly 70,000 people in Rep. McCarthy's district alone could lose access to Medi-Cal.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ninety-five *thousand* people. These are numbers that rocket the mind.[[2]](#footnote-2) But each of these persons is not a statistic. Each person, if we hold fast to a loving God, is God’s own belovèd child. Just as beloved as Jesus.[[3]](#footnote-3) Almost 25% of our neighbors in Kern County live below the poverty line. That number has risen every year over the past ten years.[[4]](#footnote-4) One person out of every four. That translates to more than 50 people in our parish.

And that brings us to the prophet Isaiah.

Isn’t Isaiah today talking about us?

God commands the prophet:

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God. . . .[[5]](#footnote-5)

As if they were a nation that practiced righteousness . . . . As if *we* were a nation that practiced righteousness.

The Hebrew Bible often yokes together righteousness and justice.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the New Testament, one word means both “righteousness” and “justice.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Righteousness *and* justice.

In other words, being right with God, having righteousness, *requires* doing justice.

In the Bible, doing justice is not an option.

In other words, merely going to church don’t cut it with God. In fact, living a good middle-class life, raising the kids, keeping the yard looking nice, don’t cut it with God.

Here’s what counts with God:

Is not *this* the fast that I choose:
to untie the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Let’s get real here: throwing people off Obamacare, kicking people out of Medi-Cal, is to do the exact opposite of what God wants: stomping on the poor when they’re already down is to tighten the straps already binding them, perhaps with barbed wire; it’s to push down even harder the heavy yoke across their backs.

Even worse—yes, there can be a worse—oppressing the poor, hungry, and naked is apostasy.

Apostasy.

“Apostasy” literally means “standing away.” That is, standing away from, standing apart from, God. As a synonym for “apostasy” Merriam-Webster dictionary offers “defection.”

“Defection” in turn comes from the Latin verb *dēficere*, “to run short, fail, weaken.” “Apostasy,” then, suggests a failure of faith, a weakness of faith. The spellcheck on my computer didn’t like *dēficere*; it suggests instead “defacer.” OK. An apostate defaces his or her faith.

Jim Wallis, founder and head of Sojourners, the social justice ministry, tells a story about someone whom many would regard as a defacer. But he’s not; in fact, he’s a restorer: he’s restoring what much of Christianity in this country has lost.

When Wallis was in seminary, a fellow seminarian took the Bible and cut out every passage that deals with what we now call social justice. The resulting gutless Bible, Wallis points out, looked like Swiss cheese. I would add: flavorless Swiss cheese.

Anglicanism has traditionally focused on scripture, tradition, and reason. We later gave our three-leggèd stool a fourth leg, borrowed from the Methodists: religious experience, that is, spirituality, living with the living God

As awkward as a five-leggèd stool may be, I want to add a fifth leg: action.

Action.

As another of my modern heroes, Desmond Tutu, says, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Let me be blunt: a repeal of Obamacare, casting hundreds of thousands of people into the outer darkness where there is no healthcare, just the moaning and wailing of the sick and the dying, is injustice.

Or to be blunter, with words attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Giving tax breaks to the wealthy while the poor remain poor, or get poorer, is evil; subsidizing the rich while the hungry stay hungry and the homeless go unhoused, is evil.

Tough words.

But they’re not mine, nor are they just Tutu’s or Bonhoeffer’s: they speak of God, the God of the Torah and prophets like Isaiah, the God of Jesus.

But—thanks be to God—there is an alternative to injustice and evil. Listen to what God promises if we do justice and thus live righteously:

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

If we live justly and do justice, here is God’s promise: we “shall be like a watered garden, / like a spring of water, / whose waters never fail.”

Amen.

1. <http://www.turnto23.com/news/local-news/supporters-of-affordable-care-act-and-current-medi-cal-hold-rally-and-march-to-voice-concerns>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From “Advice to a Prophet” by Richard Wilbur: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43044>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Mark 1:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.healthykern.org/index.php?module=indicators&controller=index&action=view&indicatorId=347&localeId=252>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi5_RCL.html#ot1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, see Proverbs 8:20; Wisdom says “I walk in the way of righteousness, / along the paths of justice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Greek *dikaiosúnē.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://sojo.net/articles/11-bonhoeffer-quotes-remember-pastor-who-resisted-evil-unto-death>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)