

Sermon for Sunday, December 5, 2010
Advent 2
Rev. Judith Watt

Isaiah 11: 1-10
Matthew 3: 1-12

Breaking Down Barriers/ Aw, Geez

If you saw the headline on the Sports page of yesterday's Chicago Tribune, you saw Ron Santo's familiar exclamation *Aw, geez*. That was the headline. I woke up Friday to the news that Ron Santo, former Cubs third basemen and familiar voice on WGN's broadcast of the Cubs games since 1990, had died. Anytime I was in the car on either Friday or Saturday, he was the subject of WGN radio, as friends and colleagues and Chicagoans and people from all over the country paid tribute to him and expressed their grief over his death early Friday morning. Yesterday afternoon, each time I turned on the car radio, there was another fellow, calling in, telling a story about some way Ron Santo or his life had touched the caller and each time, the caller choked up and you could almost hear his tears over the radio.

Aw, geez was a great headline because it conveyed so many things in just two short words – not even words. *Aw, geez*. The collective disappointment of Cubs fans during any bad play in a game and the unique way Ron would express that disappointment, on the spot, for all of us. Frustration, disgust, and then disappointment. Any Cubs fan knows that feeling. But *Aw, geez*, written in yesterday's headline, also gave expression to the grief felt by so many at the news of Ron Santo's death. *Aw, geez*, Ron Santo is dead.

Another article at the bottom of the first page was titled "Through the pain and disappointment, he never stopped clicking his heels." "Through the pain and

disappointment, he never stopped clicking his heels.” Another few words that conveyed so much at once. Sure, there is the pain and disappointment we all feel and laugh about regarding the Cubs, if we are fans. But there’s always next year, so we keep clicking our heels, kind of. But there was the pain and disappointment we knew about in Ron Santo’s life. A guy who had had diabetes since he was 18, but despite it, went on to play major league baseball. He kept his diabetes a secret for a long time. A guy who had seen the pain and disappointment over and over again at repeatedly not making the cut for the Baseball Hall of Fame. A guy who eventually had both legs amputated, the result of his lifetime struggle with diabetes. “Through the pain and disappointment,” the Tribune said, “he never stopped clicking his heels.” That is what all of us struggle with, isn’t it? How to keep clicking our heels despite pain and disappointment.

Aw, geez should have been the title for today’s sermon. As I read the scriptures for this week, especially the one from Isaiah, I found myself getting sadder and sadder. Some of you with different personalities maybe would have gotten angrier and angrier. Isaiah paints a picture at the end of today’s scripture – a picture of a time promised when wolf shall live peacefully with lamb, when both the calf and the lion can live together, a time when “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” The vision cast in Isaiah is quite far away from the reality I see in the world around me today. My sadness as I sat with these scriptures came at the tremendous gulf that exists between our present reality and Isaiah’s vision for a world promised in the future. A world in which no one has to devour anyone else. So, *aw geez*, could have summed up my feeling about the state of our world this season. In fact, I can more easily imagine calves and lions living

peacefully than I can Republican working collegially with a Democrat or a Palestinian sharing the same land mass and enjoying the same rights as an Israeli or we humans living with a reverent regard for one another, or for the earth, or for life itself. Actually, I would guess that some of you Sox fans can see lions and lambs living together peacefully far more easily than you can imagine the Cubs having a winning season, too.

War and WikiLeaks, joblessness and jostling over tax cuts. As a people, we're a long way from the peaceable kingdom that Isaiah proclaims will some day be a reality. The gap between hope's vision and the reality of the statistics of the current season is what makes me sad and disappointed, sometimes angry and it's why *Aw, geez* is such a fitting exclamation of disappointment.

Another preacher, Stephen Montgomery, expresses the same emotion but a little differently. "The longer I live, the longer I am in ministry, the more deeply this particular promise of God touches me; and I think it is because I see in so many lives-- and in my own life--how overwhelming is the longing for this vision, this sense of shalom."

I had three different conversations this week with people who were disappointed because of the gap that existed in their lives - between how they wanted a relationship to be and how it really was. Or perhaps it was a gap between how a person wanted to feel about someone in their lives and how they really felt. People expressing frustration over someone or something but still wanting to live through the disappointment differently than they had. That desire for living differently is the yearning. We all have that somewhere in our lives. The disparity between how we'd like to be and how we really are. The disparity between what we would have wanted from someone else and what

they really have to offer. We have in our own lives and in our own actions this same kind of gap that exists in the world – the gap between what doesn't exist in the world and what could be. Hope that is unrealized, sometimes for years.

The realization of the gulf, the sadness felt because what had been hoped for isn't yet reality, the anger that sometimes can be there in the midst of it – and the desire that things would be different. It is in that desire where hope is found. It is in that desire where the little green shoot can be seen, barely visible, but still coming out from the stump of Jesse. The realization of the need to pray, the nagging feeling that you need to ask for forgiveness, or need to forgive, the yearning for things to be different – in those things, in those feelings is the hope – the little green shoot emerging – the hope for a new future. All of this is really far deeper than I can explain but I think it's why someone like Ron Santo captures imaginations. Not because he is a saint or perfect by any means but because his life was a life that magnified the human struggle – deep disappointment and yet continued hope. Yesterday, I thought about others who have conveyed the same kind of thing for us. Cardinal Bernardin came to mind. His last years were filled with deep disappointment – a charge of sexual abuse, and then a clearing from that charge, and still his own reaching out to the person who had been his accuser – and his writing about forgiveness over that situation – some of the drama played out during his own battle with prostrate cancer which finally took his life. Disappointment, struggle but still hope and forgiveness and love. All mixed up at times. Not sorted out. But the little green shoot is there asking for us to nurture it and to sustain it and to be gentle and patient with it, so that eventually it will thrive.

It's interesting that today, in the Gospel scripture, John the Baptist, in his unique style, calls our attention to repentance. Basically he announces Jesus – the hope of the world – the One who is coming - and then he calls us out – makes us think about the gap in our lives – the gulf – the sin – the lostness. One of the reasons I find this scripture so distasteful is that John the Baptist calls these Pharisees and Sadducees a Brood of Vipers. I don't like the phrase. It turns me off. What I hadn't realized before this week is that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were two opposing religious groups at the time – two opposing strains of what was then a budding Judaism. They had come together around this Jesus who they were united in opposing and they came to John the Baptist for baptism, for some political or phony reason and he called them out. He said something like, “Don't come here pretending to want baptism – pretending to want cleansing – claiming that you are a child of Abraham, claiming that you are a person of faith just because, without realizing that it's more than talk. Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” In other words, John the Baptist reminds us we have to keep wanting to come into line with what God's purposes for us and for the world are. Repentance isn't an apology. John's call isn't for an “I'm sorry.” It's a call to return – to return from exile, to life in the presence of God, to a life centered in God, a life that is lived in the fullness of who we are created to be in God's eyes. A life built on rock and not on sand. Marcus Borg says “The roots of the Greek word for repentance mean to go beyond the mind that you have.”

Isaiah lays out the hope. John the Baptist calls us out. We know the gap that exists between the hope and the reality is what the Aw, geez really conveys. But Isaiah's picture of the future says “Even though the world has become a living nightmare, even though there is no sign anywhere that peace will ever come, even though human greed

and destructiveness are running rampant across our world, even though my life or your life might sometimes look like a mess, THE PROMISE OF GOD IS MORE POWERFUL THAN THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF HUMANITY! The promise of God is more powerful than the destructiveness of humanity! The wolf *shall* dwell with the lamb; the leopard *shall* lie down with the kid.

Another public figure has said it and lived it in our time, too. This is his poem, titled:

Who Am I?

I was born in 1931.
My father was a school teacher.
I spent three years as a high school teacher before I was ordained.
I am a small person with a huge laugh.
I bounce into room full of joy and delight.
I can put people at ease easily.
I catch people's attention.
I use my hands when I speak.
My eyes twinkle behind gold rimmed spectacles.
I am passionate about God, Christianity and my country.
I have spent my life fighting against injustice and racism.
I have shared my vision with kings, presidents and all sorts of world leaders.
I believe in a world where black and white can go hand in hand into a glorious future.
I believe each person in the world is a creature of infinite value made in the image of
God.
I am confident of the future because I believe in God's faithfulness and power to deliver
those who ask for help.
I am Desmond Tutu.

Advent is all about the yearning for the promises of God to come fully into the world. It's about how to keep clicking our heels even through pain and disappointment – How can we do that? Because we have been so privileged and so honored and so gifted to know the power of God through Jesus, this One coming, born in a manger, suffered

under Pontius Pilate, but even so, risen in our midst and in our hearts forever. Aw, geez
is part of life, but Alleluia, Praise God, is what keeps calling to us.