

...To Proclaim Liberty to the Captives

3 Advent Year B
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Freeing the Prisoners

- Today's reading from Isaiah begins with this:: "He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, the bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to release the prisoners..."
 - Refers to the Year of the Jubilee:
 - Jubilee:
 - Meant to be celebrated every 50 years as a means to forgive debts and to return land and property to its ancestral owners
 - In Isaiah: its applied to the return of the exiled peoples to Zion and of the return of the land of Zion to its ancestral peoples.
 - In the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus using these words to describe his own ministry:
 - 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
 - He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...."
- Freeing the prisoners has also been the work of Amnesty International
 - On the altar today, you'll see additional candle, representative of the symbol of Amnesty International
 - AI had its beginnings in 1961, when English labor lawyer Peter Benenson read about two students who were sentenced by the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal to seven years imprisonment for "having drunk a toast to liberty."
 - Peter Beneson said that if you "Open your newspaper any day of the week, you'll find a story about someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because their opinions or religion are unacceptable to the government.
 - "And apparently , there was nothing I could do about it. ..Yet, if there was someway to take a common action by many people, perhaps something effective could be done."

- What started as a short-term appeal for two students has now become an international movement with 7 million members around the world.
- With the candle reminding us that “it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness.”

Carl Niehaus

- I had been a supporter of the work of AI for years, and I always wondered if the letters written on behalf of prisoners of conscience really had any effect.
 - I had a chance to ask that question to Ambassador Carl Niehaus, a South African of Dutch Afrikaans descent
 - Carl arrived in The Hague as the Ambassador of South Africa to the NL at the same time that I was assigned as the Air Force attaché at the American Embassy at the Hague. (He arrived with somewhat more pomp and ceremony than I did.)
 - C.N. was a theology student who became a member of Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress Party, the ANC. He spoke out against the apartheid regime in South Africa, and for that Carl was given 15 year jail sentence for treason in 1983,
 - At the same time, his fiancé, Jancie (who had recruited Carl into the ANC) was also convicted of treason and sentenced to four years
 - He said that during his seven year term he was treated badly and his fiancé, even more so.
 - In 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison by President de Klerk, Carl Niehaus was also set free.
 - Four years later, Carl became the spokesperson for Nelson Mandela and in 1996, he was appointed South Africa’s ambassador to the NL.
- When he talked about his time in prison Ambassador Niehaus spoke of his faith in Jesus Christ and how that kept his hope alive during the darkest moments of his imprisonment.
 - I asked him, “What about Amnesty International?” Did you ever hear from them during your seven years in prison.
 - His response: “During my 7 years in prison, I heard nothing from AI. I saw no letters written on my behalf. Nothing.”

- Well, I thought, that was a disappointing bit of news. (...Just another organization that collects Big Contributions, but fails to carry out its mission.)
- “But *after* I was released,” Ambassador Niehaus said, “the prison authorities showed me where they had stored the letters written at the request of Amnesty International on my behalf.”
 - There were thousands of letters and postcards in overstuffed mailbags, cardboard boxes, sacks of mail. So much so that the prison authorities had given up trying to sort them out.”
 - All written on behalf of Jancie and myself.
 - And what those letters did, Card said, was to tell the Apartheid government that the whole world was watching, and that I couldn’t be conveniently “disappeared” without anyone knowing about it.
 - I’m sure the letter writers kept me alive, and for that I will always be grateful.”

AI at Christ Episcopal Church

- Inspired by Carl Niehaus, and given the general disregard shown by many nations around the world for even the rudimentary trappings of judicial process,
- ...some members of this congregation & I would like to restart a quarterly signature campaign on behalf of political prisoners around the world.
 - The first political prisoner for whom we ask you to sign a petition will be sent to the Minister of Justice in Ankara, asking for the release of Taner Kılıç, the Chair of Amnesty International in Turkey.
 - Taner was imprisoned on 6 June, along with 10 other human rights defenders—the Istanbul 10, as they were called—who were arrested in July while attending an Amnesty workshop.
 - They all were charged with being members of an armed terrorist organization.
 - After three months of imprisonment, and after three months of public outcry from around the world, the Istanbul 10 were released on bail, but their trial continues.
 - Taner Kılıç still remains in jail.

- Not that he lacks for company. There are 36 men housed in his cell, meant to hold 8 prisoners.
- Taner's fate is shared by others who act on behalf of human rights in Turkey.
 - Turkey currently jails more journalists than any other country.
 - 130 journalists and others who work in the media are now behind bars.
 - 160 media outlets have been shut down, and 2,500 journalists and other media workers have lost their jobs.
- So what can we do to aid these prisoners of conscience?
 - Prayer is a good start
 - Paul reminds us in the Letter to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing..."
 - Taner Kılıç needs our prayers...and Jesus reminds us that we should pray for our enemies...and certainly for President Erdoğan of Turkey, who has a place on my enemies list; I am obliged to pray for him as well.
 - But the First Letter of John reminds us that more than prayer is often needed:
 - 1 John 3:18: " ...“Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”
- I think that "loving in truth and action" is what we are meant to think about during this Advent season.
 - The readings of Advent oblige to ask ourselves, "Where do we see God working in the world today? How do I live that out in truth and action?"
 - Jesus insists that his coming means wars and rumors of wars; we have been warned about unparalleled suffering that must come before the Son of Man comes to gather his elect.
 - And where do we see God in all this?And how do we respond in truth and action.
 - And the current political and social climate has been equally depressing:
 - Incivility on a scale not seen since the run-up to the War Between the States,
 - Tribalism that trumps any bad behavior
 - Genocide in Burma, in Syria;

- And where do we find God in all this? And how do we respond in truth and action?
- There are two ways of answering this question, and how we answer this question makes all the difference.
 - The first way of answering the question of “where do we see God in all this, is to focus on the past.
 - It is to ask: “There did we go wrong? What did we do to deserve all this. For what sins are we being punished?”
 - And because this is deserved punishment from God,
 - We can’t really respond in truth and action;
 - We can’t do anything but suffer (although suffering in silence is optional for many people).
 - The second way of answering this question is focus on the future: “What does God want us to do, today, in these current circumstances, that only we can do?”
 - Jesus has a consistent answer: “Today, God wants you to work on behalf of and plead on behalf of the oppressed.”
 - That is how we can “love in truth and action.”
 - This is how we can light that candle rather than cursing the darkness
 - This is how we can live a life that is an answer to God’s call.
 - One thing we can do today, this morning, is to sign a petition to the government of Turkey to release Taner Kılıç from prison and dismiss the charges against the Istanbul 10.
 - We will be offering petitions for you to sign to the Turkish government after today’s Eucharist.
 - Those going to coffee will find volunteers (family Ibsen, the family Jackets, and the family Barrett) who will have identical petitions, so you won’t have to wait in a long line to put down your signature.
 - Here’s what the petition says, very simply:...next page.
 - I hope that signing this letter is something that you are called to do

- It is one way that we can light a small candle to bring bring more light to Tanair and the Istanbul 10
- It is one way to light another candle in this Advent Season
 - As we stand in protest against the dictators of the world
 - As we stand in solidarity with prisoners of conscience
 - And as we prepare for the Light of Christ coming into the world.
 - When we give thanks to God for his immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ—for the means of grace and the hope of glory.