

“Follow the Leader” Isaiah 11:1-10, Mt. 3:1-12 December 9, 2007

Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore San Dimas Community Church, UCC

Yesterday some of us went to Long Beach to honor and celebrate the leaving of our conference ministers, Dan Romero and Jane Heckles. For those of us who had the opportunity to work closely with Jane and Dan, we were blessed to see modeled by them rare and faithful leadership. It was easy for me to follow their lead because I knew they were faithful and truthful. They were great listeners and helped me to find my voice. They modeled decision making by consensus. Conference ministers often get called in to clean up church messes and so they often get pegged the enemy “Out there.” But I was privileged to see their other sides.

What does it take to be a good leader? What kind of person do we want to follow? The popularity of TV shows like “The Apprentice” seems to say that many people would like someone like Donald Trump to be their leader--that he has the attributes for success and that he knows how to teach others to be great leaders. I personally don’t like it that kids are growing up wanting to be like Donald Trump.

The last time I preached on these lectionary texts we were in the middle of a presidential campaign, and I remember hearing a television report that said people were choosing the President of the United States based on who they would most like to share a beer with. This seems an odd criteria for choosing the most powerful person in the world.

What do today’s biblical texts tell us about what it takes to be a good leader? John the Baptist was a leader with a great following. He appears to have lived alone in the desert except when he preached to the multitudes. He looked rather strange, ate unusual food, and appears to be someone who was charismatic and also a bit scary. He spoke his mind, didn’t mince words, called it like he saw it. He was bold and either courageous or foolhardy since his truth telling eventually resulted in his getting beheaded. Perhaps we might sum up his leadership qualities as: willingness to stand alone even if it means being lonely, telling the truth, articulating a vision that may not be popular, and standing on principle.

Now let’s look at the Isaiah text. This beautiful poem lists quite a few leadership attributes. First the long awaited leader is from the family tree of Jesse, lineage of David, and filled with God’s Spirit. This Spirit is wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and fear of God. Think about what’s missing from this list: there’s no mention of military victories, no mention of wealth and popularity, no mention of being a good drinking buddy. Rather, a leader is one who is filled with God’s Spirit.

And then Isaiah spells out for us what it means to be a leader filled with God’s Spirit. This leader will not judge by appearances. How you look and how much money you have doesn’t matter. This leader will not make decisions on hearsay. This leader doesn’t listen to gossip or the opinions of others. This leader defends the lowly and cares most about those less fortunate--those caught in a cycle of poverty or abuse or people not given the opportunity to rise to their full potential. This leader is more like Oprah offering opportunities for young girls in Africa to go to school, than like Donald Trump saying “You’re Fired.”

Another important attribute of the leader described in Isaiah is how this leader attacks evil. He uses the rod of his mouth. I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. The rod of his mouth changed our world. He confronted violence with wise words. I’m not sure we fully recognize how wise words can be an effective weapon of war against evil in our world? Isaiah’s leader wears a belt with a concealed weapon--the weapon of justice. The band around his waist is not protective armor but righteousness. Because these leadership qualities are nonviolent and do not

require the use of dangerous weapons, leadership is not only an adult thing--even a little child can be a leader.

John Dominac Crossan is a noted New Testament scholar of today. I heard him say this, "so many Christians want to believe in a 'kick-butt God.'" But Isaiah's vision of leadership is not a kick-butt God: it's a small child armed only with wise words, truth, and righteous judgment. Isaiah's leader is so powerful that a vision of a whole new world is ushered in. Even the animals get along. What a contrast in leadership this is to today's action packed heroes. Our children are inundated with violence on TV and video games where they see modeled heroes who are heroic because their violence wins the day. It's no wonder children grow up to be violent,; they are shown how to do violence every day.

In Romans we have one more important clue as to good leadership and that is servanthood. Jesus was not caught up in his own agenda but in being God's Son and servant. Now when we talk about servanthood we have to be careful not to be heard as saying that we must allow others to have their way with us. Servanthood is not the same as allowing others to abuse us. If we are God's servants, we speak the truth, we are bold, we judge with God's righteousness, and we treat ourselves and demand that others treat us with the love and respect that God has for all humankind. Why is it so tempting to choose leaders like *The Terminator* rather than leaders like Mother Teresa? Why are our leaders often those who have the greatest power *over* rather than power *with*?

By the time our daughter, Brittany, was in the second grade it was evident that she was a very talented soccer player. At that early age she could zigzag through the other players on the field and pretty much score at will. Of course, at that young age, the teams didn't want to skunk the opposition by running up the score. So after Brittany would score her third goal the coach would fold his arms across his chest and that was her signal to not score anymore goals and to only pass to her teammates. Pretty soon she became an expert at setting up plays for her teammates to score. And to her that became even more challenging and fulfilling because she could use her mind and "read" the field of play and create opportunities based not only on her own physical skill but on the cooperative efforts of her teammates. People said she was a selfless player, and she gained the respect of her team and coaches. When she graduated from UC Berkeley, she was one away from breaking the school record for "career assists" set by Joy Fawcett who was on the women's olympic soccer team. Brittany had mastered power with in contrast to power over. Power over only lasts until someone else who is a little bit better, a little bigger, or a little stronger comes along. Power WITH--the power of relationships last a lifetime.

Advent is the perfect time to examine our criteria of leadership because we are face to face with the power of the baby Jesus. Jesus combined all the qualities noted in these texts. He was bold, told the truth, was filled with God's Spirit of wisdom, understanding, strength, and fear (meaning respect) of God. He judged not by hearsay or superficialities but by righteousness. He was a charismatic servant leader. If we follow Jesus, if we keep asking WWJD, then we will lead as Jesus led and we will choose leaders who lead as Jesus led. Today we light the candle of peace, the peace known as shalom. Walter Bruggemann says that "shalom is creation time, when all God's creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating....The new world will indeed be safe for the vulnerable." Today we view this kind of shalom as naive wishful thinking. But there is a different way; the Bible tells me so! Perhaps if we listen carefully, if we consider that shalom is a gift from God just waiting for us to receive it, then our world will become the peaceful kingdom where "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, and a little child shall lead them."