

## Obedience To Something Greater

December 09, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

In our private moments when we contemplate the world around us, when we think about and pray to God, there are always unasked questions in the back of our minds. One of these questions is *does God actually intervene in human history?* Does he really invade our affairs, our politics, our international life, our Church. The ultimate claim of the Bible is that he does and Christian belief accepts that claim. We could say that one phase of the Advent, the coming of God is that he does intervene.

The Old Testament prophets were probably the greatest teachers about this, and of them, Isaiah was the greatest of them all. From his vision spring the magnificent phrases we heard read a few moments ago: *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse (11:v1a); He shall not judge by what his eyes see, but with righteousness (v.3b-4a); Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness around his loins (v.5); The wolf shall live with the lamb, the*

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*leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them (v.6).* This is the promise of our acceptance of the Nativity.

It was Isaiah who first took monotheism seriously. It was Isaiah who saw that true monotheism, a fundamental belief that God was *One* and that there could only be one God in all Creation, meant inescapably that everything that happened, all human history, was finally in the hands of a Holy, Loving, Judging God.

It has been said that the amazing thing about the Hebrews was not so much the things that happened as their understanding of the *meaning* of the things that happened. Sometimes, however, the understanding is somewhat cloudy. Consider the case of Ahaz, for example, which Isaiah mentions in Chapter 7, a few chapters earlier than today's reading.

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Ahaz was the King of Judah around 750 BC, king of one half of the Holy Land. His kingdom was caught in the web of power politics with his scheming neighbors, including the giant power of Assyria threatening from the north and Egypt looming large in the South.

Ahaz was not one of the more distinguished monarchs in history. He was timid, he was scheming, he was skeptical about God, skeptical about humanity, and convinced that the way to get along was to play the power game and balance one force against another. The trouble was Ahaz backed the wrong horse. He forgot Murphey's Law: *If anything can go wrong it will*. It did. He lost. All of his shrewd maneuvering went for naught.

All of this could have been foreseen by an astute observer and, as a matter of fact, it was. Isaiah, for

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one, foresaw exactly what was going to happen. The issue was not political, it was theological. This was the greatness of the issue, and Isaiah used a curious and delightful image about all of this. He wrote *On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the river....with the King of Assyria...the head and the hair and the hair of the feet, and it will seep away the beard as well* (v.20).

Isaiah had a way with vivid phrases like that, but the point is not its vividness, but in the significance of the phrase. This hired razor of the Lord's is nothing less than Assyria, the most powerful and portentous kingdom in the known world. Only a great God could shave with such a razor as that and this is how Isaiah visualized God. This is monotheism carried to its farthest limits. There is only God. He creates, he judges, he reigns over human affairs and he uses nations for his own purposes.

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We may wonder with good reason what this tale of Ahaz and his folly can say to us today. Well, it speaks of the greatness of the prophets. It tells us that they saw the hand of God at work even in transitory and unimportant things. It speaks, too, of the greatness of God in that he *did* move in such unimportant things. In truth, there is nothing in human history which is not of concern to him. This is part of the prophetic message too.

This is basic Christian faith. How God moves in history, what instruments he uses, is not always clear to see. He has his own instruments and his own way. They are not always our instruments and our way. God moves along his own course without reference to what seems to us to be right, or good, or even justifiable.

Could it be that the Lord is taking a few more strokes with his hired razor? This is the way the prophets would look at it. I suggest to you that God shaves with

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a hired razor now as he did in the days of Isaiah 2700 years ago. The important thing is not the razor but the shaving. If our current history as a Nation and a Church, with all of its uncertainties and perplexities is really part of God's long intercourse with humankind, then perhaps we should view it all with very different eyes. Doing so, we'll understand anew the whole question of a Nation's obedience to something greater than itself.

I'm not suggesting that we need more *churchi-ness* in national affairs, or the Anglican Communion or even the Church. It is not that somehow we are suddenly to become *Holy*. I'm suggesting that we need reconciliation, not negotiation, not compromise, but reformed hearts, lives and relationships.....*a change of heart*, if you will. We should recognize that God is good. It is God who breaks through our selfishness and our narrowness to challenge us with a vision of something greater than ourselves. He confronts us

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with visions of himself and his will, and we *do* have the capacity to respond and obey. What *we* need is the will.

**AMEN.**