

Text: Isaiah 61: 1-11
Title: Taking up the Text
Date: 12.11.12
Roger Allen Nelson

When Herman Cain suspended his campaign for the presidency he mounted a stage at a political rally and delivered a fiery defiant speech. He tossed out zingy one liners and railed against the dirty dealings of politics. He attacked the usual suspects and then he quoted Pokemon ~ that Japanese video-game-cartoon-trading card-manga-anime-movie merchandising empire. He said, quoting Pokemon:

Life can be a challenge; life can seem impossible; it's never easy when there is so much on the line. But you and I can make a difference.

Cain had used the quote before. He attributed it to a poet. He later acknowledged that he heard it while watching the Olympics. It is actually lyrics from a song by Donna Summer that was used at the end of "Pokemon: The Movie 2000."

An unlikely quote, from an unlikely candidate, but he made it his own. In his words:

I'm not sure who the original author is, so don't go write an article about the poem. But it says a lot about where I am - where I am with my wife and my family, and where we are as a nation.

Herman Cain picked up a text ~ from someplace ~ and made it his own. It became a way in which he wanted to define himself and his quest. It became a way to frame self and world. It became his last word.

It's not that odd or remarkable. Okay, it is Pokemon. That seems a little odd. But, many of us pick up texts and images that help us place where we are and where we're going. Beyond what we put on bumpers, t-shirts, or tombstones there are lines, texts, and images that give language or shape to who we are and what we do. My mind is full of lyrics that have helped me make sense of self. I can't point to only one passage or one line, but I know that I have taken up texts as a way to define myself and my quest.

What text are you taking up?

Twelve years ago I met Anna Pina ~ an Ecuadorian businesswoman, a relentless Energizer Bunny of activity who smiled and laughed easily. Every day when Anna went to work she saw children living on the streets. She saw them outside her apartment, outside her business, at the city gates, and in the marketplace. She saw kids everywhere ~ living on the streets.

Anna was in a small group Bible study that was reading and praying through the Bible. One morning in an obscure corner of Ecuador, in an obscure passage in the Old Testament, she read these lines:

*Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin;
pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord.*

*Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children,
who faint from hunger at the entrance of every street."*

Lamentations 2:19

In that voice of scripture she heard the voice of God and she went back to her friends in the Bible study and said, "I have to do something to help these children." They told her, "You're right; you do; and we'll help support you." So, this diminutive-rounded-at-the-edges woman left her business and faithfully stumbled forward to care for these children.

Today there is a sprawling collection of huts and classrooms and playgrounds. There is a clinic, cafeteria, and church building. There are acres of vegetables for the eighty children who are residents and students. There is a social worker helping families reintegrate children from street to home, and a doctor, and a cadre of teachers and care providers, and the restless-relentless-joyful-bustle of children filled with hope.

Anna Pina took up that text from Lamentations and found there a sense of self, and place, and purpose. She took up that text and made it her own.

What text are you taking up?

When Jesus went to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath, he opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and found the place where it is written.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He picked this morning's text and read it aloud. Then he sat down, assuming the position of a teacher, everybody inched closer, and he said, "Today this scripture has come true in your hearing."

Jesus took up that text and made it his own.

Jesus took up this text in Isaiah to define self.

Jesus took up this text as his mission statement.

Jesus took up this text as his first word.

In the Gospel of Luke this is the first public speech by Jesus.

It is his inaugural address.

Now, while there is substantial scholarly debate about the original author and the original intent of Isaiah 61, there is no disagreement that Isaiah 61 gets at the heart of God. This text points to a great reversal, where, by an act of God, all of this is overturned....

And the brokenhearted will be healed,
the captives will be free,
those who grieve will sing for joy,
those who despair will be clothed in praise,
and those who are bent sticks will be mighty oaks.

That hope is laced throughout the Bible by prophet, psalmist, and apostle. That heart beats in a variety of historical situations, is told in a variety of voices, and is imagined in a variety of ways. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

... Jews and Christians hold firmly to the conviction that one will come from God who will mend the world. How and when and who is not a proper issue for these convictions of hope. For the theme of hope it does not matter greatly that Jews wait for the first coming and Christians wait for the second coming. Jews and Christians stand waiting together.... That hope is a reading of history against the common reading which leads to hopelessness. But, because God oversees history, it is affirmed that the present shapes of reality and power are provisional, kept open for the other One, not yet here but very sure to come...

That is to say that God will rend the heavens and come to help ~ Advent One.

That is to say that creation is not just aimlessly jetting through the ether, neither is it on a trajectory of moral and spiritual progress that will lead to perfection, but that by the work and will of God creation will culminate in *shalom*. And, in that there is comfort ~ Advent Two.

In taking up this text Jesus announced that great reversal had arrived. No longer would they stand and wait for one day, any day, some day ~ but that day was today. Jesus stepped into this text as if God himself was holding open a coat and he claimed it, fulfilled it, and gave it a body. The mystery and miracle of the gospel is that by way of cradle and cross, by the way of Jesus, God's great reversal has arrived ~ Advent Three.

Dear friends, what text are you taking up?

I probably need to change gyms. Too many people at my gym know that I am a pastor so I am often asked questions about the Bible and life. For example, late last week, a delightful retired Korean doctor, dressed in only his shoes and socks, stopped me in the locker room to ask about the line "the meek shall inherit the earth." He admitted it was a literal reading, but wondered if it meant that the young and vibrant would explore space and populate new planets and leave the old and the weak behind. "The meek shall inherit the earth....."

Early this week a weight lifter with a shaved head called me over. He asked, "Is life a series of tests and quizzes that God puts us through until we graduate to something better?" I shrugged my shoulders and tried to give some clue that I wanted to go back to working out. He continued with a story of woe: health issues, work issues, family issues and his third wife wanting to throw him a 51st birthday party, but he said I don't really have any friends. "Who would come?" "So is this just a bunch of tests I am supposed to pass....."

I couldn't just ignore him and walk away. So, I offered, "I believe that the arc of the universe is long, but it is ultimately bent toward justice and mercy. I don't know if God tests us, but I do know that we all go through difficult and hard stuff, but there will come a day God will put this world to rights. And we will all need mercy...."

He said, "I like that." Then after a long pause, "What comes first the justice or the mercy? So, does that mean I am just supposed to grin and bear it in the mean time because Jesus loves me?"

Seriously, I need to change gyms.

Dear friends, how would we take up this text?

How then would we live in the light of that great reversal?

If this reality is provisional, how would we live with the reality of a coming *shalom*?

If this text is close to the heart of God, how would we take up this text?

Let me offer one idea.....

This text in Isaiah is alive with activity. It is littered with a series of infinitive verbs: to bring, to bind up, to proclaim, to release, to comfort, to provide, to give. And, all of that action is God's action. We are called to participate, to follow, to embody, to take up the text ~ but ultimately, primarily, and finally the activity is God's. We may be God's agents, partners, and people, but the activity is God's. So, I don't know that we're just supposed to grin and bear in the mean time, but the activity is God's.

The voice in Isaiah 61 changes. Sometimes the voice is speaking on behalf of God and sometimes the voice is responding to God. Where the voice is active ~ God is at work. Where the voice is "passive" ~ it is grateful and accepting and joyful because of what God has done.

The voice of God:

In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them....

In the voice of prophet:

*I delight greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me in the garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness....*

To take up this text is to trust, hope, wait, and celebrate the coming of God in Christ. And, to take up this text is to side with, live into, participate in that which is coming, that which is God's activity....

preaching good news to the poor,
binding up the broken hearted,
freeing the captive,
releasing the debt,
comforting those who mourn,
giving a crown of beauty.

May we wait in the confidence of God's activity.

May we wait with the activity that sides with God's heart.

May we take up this text.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.