

LOOKING FOR GOOD NEWS

I look at the newspaper most days but I will confess that I am not a cover to cover reader like some people. I skim through looking for things that catch my eye and my interest. Perhaps I am looking for good news – local, regional, national and global media don't carry much of that really. This week I read something that disturbed me quite a bit. It was a piece about the funding cuts to KAIROS.

KAIROS is a church-based, non-governmental organization that represents Canada's largest church denominations – including our own. Its name is an ancient Greek word meaning *the right moment* – as in, this is the right time to do something – this is **the** moment. KAIROS unites 11 Canadian churches and religious organizations in a faithful ecumenical response to Micah's call to *do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God*. Informed by biblical teaching, KAIROS deliberates on issues of common concern, striving to be a prophetic voice in the public sphere. KAIROS advocates for social change, amplifying and strengthening the public witness of its members. It works on a range of social justice issues, including human rights in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Middle East.

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada we are most connected to KAIROS through the Justice Ministries area of the church. The mandate of Justice Ministries includes this collaboration with ecumenical partners as we seek to speak prophetically on social justice issues in our country and in the world.

Since 1973, KAIROS and the church coalitions from which it was formed have received funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to support partners in countries with the world's most egregious human rights violations including Sudan, the Philippines, Colombia, Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

On November 30th, a senior official with CIDA called the Executive Director of KAIROS to inform her that CIDA would no longer fund KAIROS, despite their 35-year collaboration. Following media reports and questions in the House of Commons, International Cooperation Minister, Bev Oda, said KAIROS's work doesn't meet current priorities of the Canadian International Development Agency.

However, the work done through KAIROS largely through the funding received from CIDA has meant greater safety for many human rights defenders. People shocked by this recent news have written letters to the Minister expressing their fears for a future without KAIROS' partnership.

The Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada wonders, "If KAIROS' work on behalf of human rights in the Congo and elsewhere does not fit with CIDA's definition of human rights the question has to be asked, why not?" The President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Council of International Cooperation notes that, "KAIROS' reputation as a human rights champion committed to advancing the voice of the poor and dedicated especially to working on poverty eradication with some of the world's most

marginalized people leave most in our sector with the impression that KAIROS not only meets, but embodies the priorities set out in the Official Development Accountability Act.”

Because it is difficult to understand how the work that KAIROS engages in doesn't fit with the priorities of the Canadian International Development Agency, there has been some speculation that the funding cut is meant to send a message to non-government organizations that depend on the federal government for funding. It is suggested by the Council of Canadians that KAIROS is being punished for taking a position critical of the agenda of the government on the eve of the Copenhagen meeting.

The whole thing knocks the stuffing out of the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love. Is there hope for our country when we continue to focus solely on self-interest? Where is our love for others and for God's creation? How can peace come in a world where human rights violations abound and integrity in the public sphere is constantly called into question? What will it take to hear with joy the good news that Zephaniah and John proclaim?

I want to rail at the decision-makers of the world the way that John denounces the crowds in the desert but I know that name calling and doomsday predictions will have little or no effect. Those of us with power to make a difference in the world have convinced ourselves that we are entitled to all that we have in the same way that those coming to hear the wild-eyed baptizer were sure that their connection to Abraham was their salvation. John is relentless in his condemnation, ordering the people to start producing some good fruit for God before it is too late. Don't you sometimes wish you had John's conviction and courage to *call them as you see them and tell it like it is?*

John announces judgment, calls for repentance and proclaims salvation in the Messiah. His message is harsh, yet Luke calls it good news. In John's day, the powers-that-be had arranged a world based on empire, with those at the top grabbing – through force and greed – the lion's share of power and material wealth for themselves (and how exactly have things changed since then?). The abuse of position and power for profit continues but it is nothing that we have invented ourselves.

Things were all out-of-whack, they had gone awry – not only in the political arena but in the religious as well – everyone felt the sting of John's rebuke. Then John calls the people to prepare for what they had been waiting for all these years. He sings the old song again – holds out the old hopes. He says that this very moment is the moment for which our grandmothers waited, this moment is the moment about which they sang. This is *kairos*.

Think back to Zephaniah. His message is like John's: a warning of universal judgment, an exhortation to repentance, and the promise of salvation. Like other prophets of his time, Zephaniah is determined to root out religion gone awry. He knows that people keep looking for a religion that will connect to the power of God without needing to be overly concerned with the needs of others. We go to God for comfort and inspiration when we get fed up with all the people in this world that make us uncomfortable and who suck the life right out of us.

Because the root of spiritual life is embedded in a relationship between people and God, it is easy to develop the misunderstanding that our spiritual life is something personal – something just between God and me – what we might call in modern Christian terms a *me and Jesus* theology. We can come to think of faith as a private thing to be nurtured by

prayer and singing, spiritual readings that reassure and encourage, and worship with like-minded friends. However, if we go along in this way for too long we can assume that the way we treat the people we don't like or those who don't like us has nothing to do with God.

That is when prophets like Zephaniah and John interrupt us, insisting that everything we think or do or feel has to do with God. We live in a vast world of interconnectedness – the connections have consequences – and all the consequences come together in God – in judgment.

God's promised judgment is the message of good news. We are bombarded with all sorts of news, much of it bad – countless sources of information about the suffering and injustice and disasters of the world – disappointing announcements about government decisions that will have a devastating impact on KAIROS' 21 overseas partners and the thousands of marginalized people they support in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. It could make you want to run out to the wilderness in search of better news, a word of hope, something to come that's worth preparing for.

What then should we do?

John's rhetoric combines grand anticipation and dramatic warning with an exhortation – simple instructions about how to live: be generous, share, following the rules, be kind, don't fight, don't hoard. Not all that complicated really, yet we seem to have trouble with it. It's not that John's message isn't significant – it is – but at the heart of it the message is that basic justice and goodness would kick the supports out from under every out-of-whack, awry, misaligned, upside-down, oppressive structure and system that we've built.

John's sermon about social justice and personal generosity resounds through Luke's writing – social and economic concerns built into the agenda of the common life of the early church.

What then should we do?

Is it all up to us? Is the cure for what ails us being nice, following the law, and being generous? Do we just need to follow the directives that John lays out – live a moral life and participate in social justice as we're able and everything will work out in the end?

What about God? What about grace?

We've all heard end of the world predictions – not just those of Zephaniah and John the baptizer – but also modern proselytizers who warn us about doomsday fast approaching. If you ask such people what to do as that end approaches they give a much different answer than John. They don't mention practicing love or justice but reduce their preparation to a focus on being "saved" – though I'm not always entirely sure what people mean when they say that.

I don't think it's an either/or sort of thing. John's call for repentance is not simply a *do good deeds – improve the world by your own actions* message. And salvation, as Zephaniah cautions is not *divorced from a sense of this-worldly and ethical rootedness* – my salvation is not just about me and God. Faith is practiced in **this** moment in the world

that God loves even as it looks forward to the re-creation and renewal of that world in God's own time – *kairos*.

Judgment is coming – fire will purge – the ax is at the root of the trees – the end is near! This *is* Good News because God promises salvation. God is in our midst and will dismiss the judgments against us. God will come into the world as an infant holy. God remains to gather us together – breaks through to fill us with joy. But in the meantime...

What should we do in the meantime?

We come to God for salvation – for a message of grace. Everything about our life counts and can make a difference because salvation is not just about *me and Jesus*; it is connected to the salvation of all that is broken in the world. Prophets throughout the ages have called the people to repentance – called us to change our thinking from self-interest to care for others – reminded us that this is *kairos* – this is *the right moment* to do something.

Go out into the wilderness – restore the prophetic voice of the church – proclaim to a weary world that the hunger, the poverty, the inequity as we know it will not have the final word. That is the good news – the hope that sustains us – the vision toward which we work because with God all things are possible. **Amen**



This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2009