

Engaging World AIDS Day on the First Sunday of Advent: Help for Preachers

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Recently, a new commentary was published called, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 2013). In addition to reflecting on the weekly Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) texts through the lens of justice, it provides readings and commentary for an additional 22 special "Holy Days for Justice," including World AIDS Day. If you are planning a special service outside of Sunday morning or are willing to depart from lectionary readings and Advent themes, then you may want to consider these texts. Regardless of your commitment to the lectionary, Chris Glaser's commentaries on Jeremiah 17:14-18, Psalm 6, James 4:11-12, and Luke 16:19-31 draw our attention to the ways common biblical themes of lament, justice, and judgment can help preachers address the HIV and AIDS pandemic in both pastoral and prophetic ways.

While I am grateful to this new lectionary resource that draws our attention to World AIDS Day, my hope is that pastors will consider engaging World AIDS Day in the regular Sunday morning worship service, using existing lectionary texts and advent themes. The coming of Christ into our world in human form and our anticipation of His return could not be more relevant to the current crisis facing the world in the form of HIV and AIDS. The fact that December 1, World AIDS Day, falls precisely on the First Sunday of Advent this year, provides us with a unique opportunity to bear witness to that truth. Between 2011-2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) is promoting a World AIDS Day theme of "Getting to zero: zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Zero AIDS-related deaths."¹ The United States government is lifting up this theme: "Shared Responsibility: Strengthening Results for an AIDS-Free Generation."² What do these World AIDS Day themes have to do with the themes of Advent? A lot.

A Vision of Peace: An AIDS-Free Generation - Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122

Both Old Testament texts focus on the future, imagining a world where the peace and prosperity (shalom) is the norm and not the exception. When addressing HIV and AIDS, it is important to lift up a positive vision of what the church and the world would be like if we took full responsibility for preventing and treating HIV and AIDS. WHO describes the vision as "Zero New HIV Infections, Zero Discrimination, Zero AIDS-Related Deaths." The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services envisions "An AIDS-Free Generation." The spread of HIV is exacerbated by both poverty and violence, and serves as a reminder that health, peace, and prosperity are intricately connected in the Hebrew concept of shalom. Isaiah 2:3 invites us to reflect on the role of education in reaching our goal of peace and prosperity, and education plays a similarly key role in HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment efforts. Psalm 122 invites us to pray for our vision of peace. Prayer can also be a crucial tool in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Not only does prayer invite God's healing and intervention, it can also function to make us more aware and attentive to the issue and the people it affects most, and hopefully, also more open to ways that we can participate in making the vision of a healthy, peaceful, and prosperous people a reality. This vision is not just for our sake but also "for the sake of my relatives and friends," as the ways that HIV impacts our communities and our world affects us all. "According to a national survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, more than 60 percent—three in five—of Black Americans know someone

¹ <http://www.who.int/campaigns/aids-day/2013/event/en/>

² <http://www.aids.gov/news-and-events/awareness-days/world-aids-day/>

living with HIV and AIDS or who has died from the disease; for most, it's a family member or close friend."³

Wake Up to a Shared Responsibility – Matthew 24:36-44 and Romans 13:11-14

The Matthew text compares the coming of the Lord to a thief in the night, but HIV is just as stealthy. An immune system crippled by HIV is much like a house that's been broken into. So is a community where HIV infection rates are on the rise. There are many zip codes in the United States whose HIV rates rival those of hard hit countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. What is it that your congregation and community can do to "get ready" to protect yourselves and each other from HIV? Can you offer testing? Can you form Care Teams to support those already infected? Are you educating both your young people AND your seniors about HIV and other STDs? Are you doing anything to reduce stigma through your preaching, your prayers? Is not protecting one another and ourselves from HIV—working for justice, treating one another with compassion, making wise choices—isn't this also preparing for the coming kingdom?

In Romans 13:11, Paul says, "you know what time it is, how now is the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." What a perfect message for World AIDS Day. How can we "sleep" through the deaths of 25 million people from AIDS since 1981?⁴ How can we sleep when every nine-and-a-half minutes, another person in the U.S.A. is infected with HIV, and, while one in five are unaware of their infection?⁵ Or, when only 25% of HIV+ persons in the U.S.A. are successfully keeping their virus under control?⁶ What are the statistics most likely to wake up your congregation? What are the rates of HIV in your community? How is HIV affecting your global mission partners? In order to achieve the vision of peace and prosperity lifted up in the Old Testament, we ALL have to wake up to our shared responsibility for one another.

The good news is that salvation is near at hand. We have the means to end the spread of HIV through a combination of treatment and prevention, even without the recent indications that a cure might be around the bend. Worldwide, new HIV infections have fallen by 33% since 2001; they have fallen by 52% among children.⁷ AIDS-related deaths have fallen by 30% since the peak in 2005.⁸ In 2012, around 9.7 million people living with HIV had access to antiretroviral therapy in low- and middle-income countries.⁹ Partnerships like the ones facilitated by Hope Springs in Baltimore (see Erin Donovan's article in this packet) give us hope that when we do wake up to our shared responsibility for one another, lives can be transformed. Visit the Hope Springs web pages at <http://hopesprings.org/>.

The Romans pericope ends with a call to put on the armor of light and to abstain from what HIV educators and advocates might call "high risk behavior." This, too, is part of HIV prevention—part of waking up to our shared responsibility, though it is important to balance calls for personal responsibility with calls for addressing the more systemic and justice-related risk factors such as poverty, mass incarceration, stigma, and gender inequality.¹⁰

³ "Exit Strategy: Ending the AIDS Epidemic in Black America. The State of AIDS in Black America 2012," Black AIDS Institute, February 2012, p. 14, http://www.blackaids.org/images/media/12_exit.pdf, accessed on 10/31/2013.

⁴ <http://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/global-statistics/>, last revised 06/06/2012, accessed on 11/2/2013.

⁵ <http://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/statistics/>, last revised 06/06/2012, accessed on 11/2/2013.

⁶ "Today's HIV Epidemic," Center for Disease Control, June 2013, p. 2,

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom/docs/HIVFactSheets/TodaysEpidemic-508.pdf>.

⁷ <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/campaigns/globalreport2013/factsheet/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Today's HIV Epidemic," p. 3.