

Love Among the Ruins

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-20



A Sermon
by
The Rev. Mark S. Delcuze

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Albrecht Durer was the first great artist of the Protestant Reformation. Born in 1471 he was one of the earliest masters of the new technology of the printing press. As the second son of a Nuremburg goldsmith, he possessed both the capital and the ambition to learn printing in his infancy. Eventually he owned and managed 24 printing presses from Lyon to Budapest and his **Nuremburg Chronicle**, an illustrated history of the entire world, contained over 1600 woodcuts and illustrations.

Durer's deepest passion was for producing art with a purpose. Today regarded as the "Leonardo da Vinci of the north", Durer painted, etched and drew the world around him with an eye for shifting tides of the times on the eve of the Reformation. His 1504 etching *The Nativity of the Christ*, was just such a co-mixture of pious art and political commentary. You'll find the scene on the cover of tonight's bulletin. Durer depicts a courtyard in a masterful display of perspective and detail. In the center and right mid-ground, we see the architecture of the Roman Empire. Rounded stone arches and massive thick walls reflect the ancient skill of its Roman builders. Off to the left, a more modern half-timber German home with a thatched roof reaches multiple stories above a small ground-level porch.

While the courtyard scene contains both the old and the new, it is all crumbling. Trees and grass emerge from the Romanesque walls while brick and plaster have fallen from the more contemporary house. Even an upper story bridge between the buildings is precariously disintegrating.

At the center of all this decay, Joseph, yes, that Joseph, kneels to draw water from a well. This humble, aged man is lovingly doing his chores to support his family. Under the porch, an adoring Mary, dressed as a German peasant girl, keeps watch over their tiny newborn child. Anyone studying this etching would be drawn into the plight of this homeless, holy family who occupy ruins that crumble around them.

Dr. Thomas Troeger, Professor of Christian Communication at Yale Divinity School has described this etching using the poet Robert Browning's weighty phrase, as "Love among the Ruins". He has recently written, "If ever there was a time when we need to return to this work of Durer, perhaps this is a time of 'Love among the Ruins'." Durer's scene seems as contemporary as a cartoon in the New Yorker. His depiction of the physical crumbling both of old Roman architecture and modern German construction was a metaphor that any of us can comprehend. While the artist understood that the monolithic fabrics of the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire were decaying; you and I might see the failures of old politics and crumbling financial structures alongside the obscenity of modern planned-obsolescence and the futility of terrorism.

With hindsight, we know that behind Durer's fears, Europe was birthing a great age of Enlightenment; but Durer, the Chronicler of Nuremburg, could perceive only dissolution. He spent the final chapter of his great book dwelling on the End of the World and the Coming Judgment of Christ. Only the Love of God could save the world of 1504 and only Love can save us now.

'Love among the Ruins' could also be a title for the Scriptures we hear tonight. In the worlds of Isaiah and Luke, things old and new were crumbling. New things were coming into being. Isaiah and Luke speak of the way that they see God at work in difficult times.

Eight centuries before the birth of Christ, Isaiah served in the Temple in Jerusalem. To the south, the might of Egypt was retreating. Soon in the east, a new power, Assyria, would be ascendant. Both of these ancient warrior nations were conquerors of God's people, but amid the rubble of the in-between time, Isaiah joyfully heralds the birth of a new king for Judea.

In Isaiah's proclamation, this boy-child is given names befitting his dignity as a gift from God: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". These are the descriptors of a leader who is wise, unflinching, far-reaching and, most importantly, a securer of peace. It is this last characteristic that Isaiah finds most significant. He goes on to prophecy that the new king will achieve peace not through muscle or armies, but "he will establish and uphold (the nation) with justice and with righteousness". The new king will re-balance life for God's people rendering justice to those who break God's law and increasing righteousness for those who keep it. This is the movement of love among the ruins.

In Luke's day, God's people struggled under foreign domination again. Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth is compelled to travel, with his pregnant fiancé, to his ancestral home to be registered (and no doubt heavily taxed) by the occupying armies of Rome just days before her delivery. Unlike Isaiah's comfortable circumstances in the Temple precincts, Joseph and Mary find themselves sleeping among the livestock in a stable. No priestly poet announces this birth. It is star-struck shepherds wondering in from the fields who tell the news of "a Savior born for us". They recount to the weary parents how the angels sang "peace to those whom God favors". Their tiny child lovingly wrapped in scraps of cloth was destined restore a nation and a people from their ruins.

Friends, ruins surround us tonight. Whether it is the withering effects of long term joblessness or the seemingly endless conflicts and terror which mar our globe, the mass killing of marine life in the Gulf or the gnawing poverty which tears at billions of human beings every night; communities, nations, economies and even continents appear astonishingly broken. Our modern ruins may seem more politically and economically sophisticated but they are no more painful, disheartening or in need of saving. Like Isaiah and Luke, we look for a way to make sense this night of our situation. Like the sages of old, we must search the ruins to find our meaning and purpose, a meaning which is located in the loving light of God.

Robert Fulghum, author of '**Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten**' tells a story about a Greek philosophy professor. It seems that it was his custom to end each lecture by asking the class, "Are there any questions?" One day a student raised his hand and - half-jokingly said, "Yes ... what is the meaning of life?"

The professor replied "I will answer your question," pulled a small hand mirror out of his pocket and told this story: "When I was a small child, living during the war [WWII], we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

"I tried to find all the pieces and put them back together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy, and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine - in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light - truth, understanding, knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life."

Sisters and brothers, tonight we gather as a family occupying the ruins of a world badly decayed by greed, pride and cruelty. We gather on one of the darkest nights of the year and we seek the light of God's unconditional love. We are not the Christ, any more than were the prophet or the evangelist or Jesus' mother or foster father, but we are reflections of God's loving light. Our work, our purpose, our meaning is to reflect light upon the ruins: the ruins of our own pain and grief; the ruins of our neighbor's want and need; the ruins of commerce run amuck and of wars begun in error. We are here tonight as mirrors of God's great love, made warm and pink and human in the flesh of the child Jesus born 2000 years ago. And perhaps, shining with reflected light, we like Isaiah and Luke and Mary and Joseph, may bring Good News of Great Joy to all the world.

I return to the words of Tom Troeger:

*If you would hear the angels sing / count every star at night
Until your heart starts wondering / who seeds the dark with light.*

*For wonder is the note that sounds / when angels visit earth,
And wonder is the note that crowns / their music at Christ's birth.*

*Such wonder redirects our sight / from all the stars above
To find that heaven's brightest light / shines here on earth as love.*

Soli Gloria Dei
The Rev. Mark S. Delcuze
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Hymn Text: Thomas H. Troeger
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