

Winter of God's Discontent

P.C. Enniss, Jr.

The Reformed Church, Bronxville, New York

Isaiah 65:17-35

Revelation 21: selected verses

There is a myth abroad in the land. It is a myth which shapes and informs our thinking more, I suspect, than most of us have imagined. The myth is that God prefers the country to the city. In its very subtle but subversive fashion, the myth suggests that while Satan thrives on the hustle and bustle of Babylon, God prefers the peace of the green pastures; God is more likely to be found in the suburbs than in the city.

Now, urban-bashing is not new. Henry Ford, who incidentally thought that the study of history was worthless, observed: "When we all stand and sing 'My Country 'Tis of Thee,' we seldom think of the cities. The country is the country—the REAL United States lies outside the cities. We shall solve the city problem finally by leaving the city." He probably had in mind that we'd be leaving driving Lincolns.

Urban-bashing is not new. There are literary critics who claim that the Emerald City in Frank Baum's "Wizard of Oz" was a symbolic New York, all glitz and glamour when seen at a distance; but once observed close up, it only makes one want to return to Kansas. Will Rogers, I suppose, did as much as anyone to fuel the myth, the way he romanticized the rural and ridiculed the city. "Hardly a day goes by that some innocent bystander ain't shot in New York City! All you got to do is be innocent and stand by and they're gonna shoot you. Why, the other day there was four people shot in one day, four innocent people in New York City—amazing, hard to find, four innocent people in New York City." Then, of course, we've all heard Ernie Campbell's great line, "If God doesn't destroy Los Angeles and New York City, God surely owes the people of Sodom and Gomorrah an apology."

There's this powerful myth abroad that God has left the city. The truth is that the case can be made that the church has left the city. What has happened in the culture has happened in the church. Every city church I know, like every downtown department store I know, is struggling, with many having closed and moved to the suburbs. Denominationally, there is a de-emphasis on urban mission. Urban ecumenical councils operate from hand to mouth. There is nothing to suggest, no evidence that I know, that the church at large remotely perceives the city as the primary focus of mission. The city far more frequently is perceived as a problem to escape. So local congregations relocate; presbyteries, operating with a franchise mentality, divert new church development dollars to the suburbs; and rare is the seminary curriculum that reflects a concern for the city, except as an occasional elective for that minority of ministers who like that sort of thing.

It's a powerful and persuasive myth. It is a myth, however, that is born out of the culture's bias and not of God. Consider that people of faith have always moved forward by visions and dreams. In the biblical tradition, dreams have always been the vehicle for God's revelation, and no vision has been more formative than the persistent vision of the New Jerusalem, the culmination of God's creation. As far back as Isaiah and before, God's people are given a vision of the messianic community. "Be glad and rejoice," says Yahweh, "because of what I am now creating. Behold, I create a new city, a new Jerusalem." Note the qualities, the virtues, and the values

of this new city: happiness, human fulfillment, and joy are the qualities that leap out of the text. No more of the infant living a few days only, or the old not living to the end of their days. The quality of life is precious in this city of God's dream. There will be housing and food. They will not toil in vain or beget their children to their ruin. It is a city devoid of violence. "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the people," proclaims the prophet, "the people will do no hurt, no harm at all on my holy mount."

Isaiah's vision is classic biblical prophecy, perfectly consistent with the character of God described in a hundred other passages and repeated by other biblical dreamers in other places and at other times, climaxing, of course, in John's vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation; of that holy city of God where once and for all, God's purpose for his people will finally and ultimately be fulfilled. It is not without significance that God's creation, which began in a garden, culminates in a city.

Now you know all that; you've heard all that. You can probably say "Amen" to all that because there's nothing new to all that. God's word is not new. What *is* new, though, is the context in which God's word is being heard in our time. What *is* new is the cultural context, the sociological context, because the culture has changed. For the first time in a hundred years, the political power in this country, that is, the votes, have moved from the cities to the suburbs. Since the late nineteenth century, when political and economic power shifted dramatically from rural to urban America, the cities have, for a hundred years, dominated the political agenda in this country. Now, for the first time in a century, that power, that vote has shifted again, this time from the cities to the suburbs. Do not think that the political strategists did not know that. Where, for example, did we hear in this past election, any plea from either party, including Mr. Perot, for the plight of American cities? It was almost as if there were "no problem," as we say so glibly. Yet we all know that the nation's most serious ills—poverty, welfare dependency, crime, low job growth, inferior schools, homelessness, AIDS—are all endemic to our inner cities.

What does all that mean for the future, and for us as a people of faith, informed by God's word as we confront this new sociological shift? John Kenneth Galbraith, the economist and former editor of *Fortune* magazine, has written a disturbing new book which points out the new danger that we face as a nation. He calls the book *The Culture of Contentment*, and he says in that book that our country in this recent past has been, and is now, a culture run by and for people who have become "comfortably contented." Now, he has in mind, I think, people much like you and me. Galbraith lists the characteristics of this new power base:

A sense of entitlement—that is, the feeling that they deserve their affluence, position, power.

The "culture of contentment" consistently thinks short-term rather than long-term.

Contented people regard government programs to assist the less fortunate as an unnecessary burden, but government support of their own affluence, as a right.

"Undergirding all of this," Galbraith suggests, "is an amazing tolerance among contented people for a new and frightening income gap between the rich people and the poor people."

Now, I don't know how you feel about that. And, surely, enough exceptions can be found to exclude any of us; but as a culture, this economist thinks it is a matter of grave concern. He says, "We are headed for disaster, and its clearest symbol is a frightening new development—a greatly expanded, seemingly permanent underclass

of people who do not work, do not vote, who have learned to live without hope for anything in their lives ever changing very much—they have simply dropped out, or have been dropped out.” “A new caste system,” he calls it. “It is a secession from the nation, more dangerous than the Confederacy.” And nowhere is it symbolized more dramatically, Galbraith suggests, “than in the enormously increased and increasing crime rate.”

I believe that the social analysis is frighteningly on target, and the danger critical. I also believe that this is where the burden of the gospel bears inescapably and compellingly upon us and upon churches like ours, because the suburbs can be so seductive. One can come, you know, to think that there *is* no problem or that if there is a problem, it’s somebody else’s problem. One can become so comfortable that we no longer feel another’s discomfort. One *can* become so content that we no longer discern God’s discontent.

I thought of entitling this sermon, “Why Can’t God Just Be Happy When We’re Happy?” but that sounded so slick. Still, it does raise the question, doesn’t it? What does it take to make God content? Someone defined theology as “worrying about those things that God worries about when God gets up in the morning.” Well, I can assure you, God is worried about what’s happening to the people in our cities. In the suburbs and the countryside, too, I know we all have our problems, but if I’m reading the Bible correctly, the focus of God’s discontent these days *has* to be on what is happening to the cities of the world, what is happening to the people in our cities; and surely God’s discontent reached new heights this winter when, to borrow from Shakespeare, this must have been the winter of God’s discontent when this country went through a national election and virtually nobody even seemed to notice the suffering in the cities.

I wonder if you read that delightful book, a best-seller for a while, about the 102-year-old Civil War widow who shared with the interviewer the wisdom that she had gained during her years. “How soon the terrible becomes routine. We’ve all got this dangerous built-in talent for turning horrors into errands.” You hear folks wonder how the Nazis could have done it. I believe that part of the answer is that they made extermination to be a nine-to-five activity—you know, salaries and lunch breaks; the staff came and did their job and then went home, ate supper, slept, woke up, came back and did their job. “That’s partly how you get anything done,” she says. “Especially a chore that’s dreadful . . . dreadful. Honey, we got to be real careful what we get used to . . . we’ve got to be real careful what we get used to.”

We’ve got to remember that life, as we know it, is quite different from life as the world, for the most part, knows it. One of the self-disciplines I have tried to maintain throughout my ministry, sometimes with more success than others, is the discipline of engaging in at least one hands-on volunteer program that puts me in the presence of the poor and the dispossessed. In Atlanta I was one of the cadre of tutors that Central Presbyterian Church sent down to Cook Elementary School one afternoon a week. In New York I have joined a team of people from our church that delivers meals to people with AIDS, so that now every Thursday afternoon I, along with two other volunteers from the church, take meals to nine men and women in inner-city Yonkers. Now, I do it for them because I know that it helps, a little. These are people who are dying, who cannot get out or pay people to come in, and so taking meals to them helps and I’m glad to do it for them. But, if I’m honest, I know that I do it as much for me as I do for them. A pastor’s study can be seductive; a sanctuary can be seductive; Bronxville, I can tell you, is seductive; and if I’m honest, I know that I go into the slums

of inner-city Yonkers every week because I need that reminder that most of the world does not live the way I live. I need to be reminded to be careful of what I get used to. Moreover, I need to remind you, too, that of those to whom much is given, much is required.

So churches mount inner-city ministries. We tutor, we staff night shelters, we feed and clothe the poor, we build houses and send inner-city children to camp. In New York we're working hard on ways to yoke strong suburban churches with struggling inner-city churches. We're doing it out of concern and out of compassion for the people to whom we minister; and, of course, we do it for those reasons, but we also do it for ourselves because deep down we know that the issue is not simply an issue of time and energy and money, as necessary as all of that is, but the issue is identification. The issue is to remember those whom the culture would be just as content to forget. The issue that the gospel forces upon us is our identity with those whom the culture would be perfectly content to have remain faceless, nameless, and invisible. There is a powerful and dangerous myth abroad in our land that would have us believe that God, like the votes, like the money, has left the city and moved to the comfort and contentment of the country.

Tom Long, who teaches at Princeton, tells of taking his two teenagers, David and Melanie, on a Christmas shopping trip to New York City. They parked the car on the Manhattan end of the tunnel, which meant they had to walk along 42 Street on the way to Bloomingdale's. I don't know if you've been to New York lately, but 42 Street is one of those streets where it seems that all of civilization's sleaziness and smut have concentrated. Tom says that not only is 42 Street the symbol of the city at its worst, *it is* the city at its worst: the pimps and prostitutes are peddling their wares wide open; dope pushers operating with impunity; pornographic movies and stage shows to suit every deviant taste; all the debauchery of the city in those few blocks just west of Broadway. "The kids were trying to look cool but my overriding thoughts were on them, in the middle of all this trash, Melanie and David, my treasure." Then he said, "For one brief moment, there entered into my mind the thought that each of these, too—the pimps and the prostitutes and the dope peddlers, the drug addicts—that each of these, too, is somebody's child, somebody's treasure." But it was a fleeting thought and so, with eyes fixed straight ahead and a protective arm around each child, he shoved their way through the crowd. At the end of the block, there was a street preacher, quoting scripture and shouting biblical admonitions through a battery-powered megaphone to the passing masses of people, who were paying him very little attention except for the occasional jeer. Now, Tom is quick to disclaim any theological or ecclesiastical affinity for this self-appointed prophet for the Lord, but since he is a professor of homiletics, "the brother *did* catch my attention because he had a text. In his own disorganized, perhaps even demented way, he was *trying* to communicate to that disinterested crowd of New Yorkers the message that was burning in his heart—for it was Christmas time and his text was 'The Word is made flesh, and dwells among us, filled with grace and truth.'"

We're not going to do ministry in New York that way, nor should we; but that brother-in-Christ had a vision, and with all the resources at his disposal, limited and misdirected as they may have been, he was doing his best to bear witness to that vision, on the corner of 42 Street and Broadway in the city of New York. You and I will do it differently but the agenda is no different. The agenda is to bear witness to that vision God has given us. With all the energy and all the enlightenment and all the enthusiasm and the resources and the imagination we have been given, the agenda is to bear

witness to the people of the city, God's treasures, to bear witness to the kind of city God has been envisioning since the beginning.

When Harry Emerson Fosdick retired as pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, he moved to Bronxville. Even after his retirement, though, he used to take the train each morning back into the city, where he maintained a small office. He soon noticed that every morning a fellow commuter, whom he knew casually and who always caught the same train, would pull down the window shade as the train passed 128th Street, and then he would close his eyes. Having observed this ritual for a while, Fosdick said to the man across the seat, "I have watched you pull your shade every morning, and I'm curious." The other man replied, "I was born in that slum, and I find it painful to be reminded of those early days, and, besides, there is nothing I can do." After a sympathetic silence, former-city-pastor-now-moved-to-suburbs said, "I don't mean to poke around in your private life, but surely you could at least leave the shade up."

We've got to be real careful what we get used to.