

“Prophetic Preparations”

Advent 2B-17

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Mark 1: 1-8

Dec. 10, 2017

Rev. Carter

“Prophetic Preparations”

Isaiah and John the Baptist. Advent’s preeminent prophets, proclaiming Advent’s preeminent prophecies. Every year, in one way or another, Advent offers us these prophets and their messages of hope combined with repentance... peace combined with radical transformation. Every Advent, they come to bring us good news!

Except... I’m not so sure their prophecies sound too much like good news. Like all prophets, their work proved to be daunting, as God has a penchant for calling prophets to proclaim difficult messages to difficult people... just as God has long tended to put God’s prophets in unexpected, if not outright difficult places.

So this morning, we shouldn’t be surprised to find Advent’s preeminent prophets located in exile and the wilderness. The wilderness and exile... this is actually where Advent begins. Not in the halls of politics or religion or even a Bethlehem inn... but in exile... and the wild, unknown wilderness.

.....

Specifically, Advent begins with Israel in their second exile. They’d been there so long by now they were barely able to see the sun, they’d become so downtrodden amid their Babylonian captivity.

God had tried to warn them. In fact, the first 39 chapters of Isaiah essentially detail all the prophecies God sent forewarning disaster if Israel didn’t heed God’s word and follow God’s ways. But 39 chapters of warning weren’t enough, as Israel refused to look in the prophetic mirror Isaiah was holding up to them.

So the Babylonian empire came. And they conquered. And they took Israel out of their homeland. Away from their promised land—the land God had promised to their ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The land that David had ruled over so wonderfully before their nation split in two... and they lost all that had once been theirs.

Isaiah had tried to warn them... but the words of the prophet are so often ignored. That’s the first 39 chapter of Isaiah.

But then... we turn the page, from the chapter 39 to chapter 40. And as we do, scholars say we not only turn the page to a new chapter, but we also turn the page on 200 years of Hebrew history. That’s how much time elapses between the end of Isaiah 39 and the beginning of Isaiah 40.

And this time, even though we turn the page and still find a prophet by the name “Isaiah,” we realize this is a new Isaiah... with a new message from God. “Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

“Can you see it?” this second Isaiah asked. “Can you hear it? Can you hear the voice crying out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Can you see what it will be like when “every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.”

This is the good news of the second Isaiah. This is the good news of Advent coming to a people in exile... This is the good news of Advent coming to those living without hope... Advent coming to people living as second class citizens... Advent proclaiming to those feeling lost or broken that hasn't forgotten you, but is coming to you. So “Comfort, my people, says God. Those who live in darkness... those who live in exile... those who live with longing... take comfort! God is coming to you! So prepare the way of the Lord,” Isaiah prophesied.

It was quite a switch from what Israel had been used to hearing. They were used to prophecies of judgment. They had grown accustomed to prophecies of condemnation. What were they to do with this news of love coming down? Dare they risk the faith to believe it? Dare they actually begin to buy into the hope of redemption and restoration?

Make no mistake, the picture Isaiah was painting was a beautiful one—one with every mountain lowered and every valley raised... with a highway for God who will come to restore Israel as a light to the nations. But his message of hope was just as hard to hear as were those messages of judgment they'd grown so accustomed to. There's a danger in hoping for a future you don't really expect to come, isn't there? It's far, far easier... far, far safer to give up on a better tomorrow rather than cling to the call of faith and risk having your hopes dashed. It's easier, much of the time, to simply give up. To throw up your hands and assume your fate has been sealed. Why risk the pain of hope unfulfilled?

.....

About 500 after our first lesson, a brand-new prophet arose in a brand-new setting... offering a message that sounded similar to the one Isaiah had prophesied in our first lesson this morning. Specifically, God called John the Baptist to the wilderness around Judea, where he walked around half-naked eating bugs and honey, shouting, “Repent! And prepare the way of the Lord!”

Now, if ever there was a prophet I would've expected to have been ignored, it would be John. Can you picture it? This strange prophet... in the nether-regions of the Judean wilderness... proclaiming a message of repentance and baptism?

This is why I used to always wonder, “Just who in the world listened to John and thought to himself, “You know, I think this guy's on to something?” I mean, John just screams to me of that stereotypical guy yelling into a megaphone standing on a milk crate on some city corner. I'd have thought he'd be someone to avoid. Not someone to actually listen to.

And yet, as the gospel of Mark tells it, people did hear and respond to John. They came from the whole Judean countryside and from within Jerusalem to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. And not just that. John became so popular and, thereby so powerful, that the powers of his day ended up having him killed.

.....

I never understood it... until Stephen and I were talking during a worship-planning meeting. He shared that every time he hears this passage he thinks of the opening scene from the movie version of the musical "Godspell." I was actually in a high school production of Godspell, but I'd never seen the movie version, so he shot it to me. And I'm grateful he did.

Now, just a bit of background... Godspell is a musical that tells that story of Jesus life and passion from a very 1970's perspective. And it begins exactly as Mark's gospel begins. With John the Baptist.

However, in the movie version of Godspell, John the Baptist begins singing his prophecy not from the wilderness of the Judean countryside, but from the middle of Central Park in Manhattan. And as his voice rings out... not everyone hears it... or at least, not everyone chooses to listen to it. But some people... some people do listen to John's prophecy. A businessman carrying his briefcase suddenly smiles, drop his briefcase, and take off towards Central Park, leaving his briefcase behind. A student hears John's song, and she looks up to heaven before running towards Central Park, leaving her backpack behind. A woman at a payphone hears the message, and simply drops the phone to follow the sound of the song... and then we see the fountain at the middle of Central Park is filled with people jumping and dancing and rejoicing in John's prophesy to repent... and be baptized... and prepare for the coming of the Lord.

It was good news to all who chose to listen to John. "Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord! And stop running this world's rat race. Repent!! God is coming in a way you cannot fathom. Life is going to be different. So leave your backpacks and briefcases and cellphones behind," John the Baptist says, "and prepare the way of the Lord!"

The movie sort of revealed something Mark had already painted, but I hadn't yet been able to see... or perhaps better said... Mark painted a picture I had refused to see, as I was too busy judging John to really listen to him. After all, that's often what we do with prophets, right? Judge them, rather than listen to them?

But as the movie showed...and as Mark's gospel tells us... not all the people... but some of the people, listened to John the Baptist. Not those in power—not those who thought they had their act together—not those who didn't think they had any need to repent. They didn't hear John's message. But those who knew they were broken, those who knew there was more to life than they had yet uncovered, those who simply lived in want or need, *they* came to John and were baptized and found the joy and hope Advent has to offer!

.....

Can you hear it?

"Comfort, you who are in pain. God is coming," says Advent.

"Repent!" Advent proclaims. "Shift your perspective! Look at the world differently! And see the kingdom of God entering into the world!"

"Don't give up," Isaiah demands. "God is one who forgives and redeems! God is one who defeats death with life, who conquers hate with love, who shines a light even in the deepest darkness, and the darkness cannot quench it. So don't give up," Advent says. "Look for God's kingdom. Repent and see life differently! Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Isaiah said it around 500 B.C.

John the Baptist said it at the time of Christ.

And the church has been saying it ever since.

“Prepare the way of the Lord!”

But we need to have the courage, as well as the humility to actually hear it... to actually recognize that in order to prepare the way for God’s entrance into our world and into our lives, there are things we need to let go of. Priorities we need to re-evaluate. Shifts we have to make. Changes we have to accept.

So let me ask you... what might that be?

What do you need to do to prepare God’s way?

What... or maybe who would Isaiah ask you not to give up on?

What... or perhaps who would John ask you to see differently?

Friends, every year... every year Advent offers us the same, challenging invitation... to heed the words of its prophets, that we might prepare the way for a deeper and more meaningful life lived within a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Emmanuel—God-with-us.