

Bible Study: Advent 2 (B) – Dec. 6, 2020

Our readings show us that waiting is not a passive action. We are to live out our hope. In waiting for the fullness of the Kingdom of God, we proclaim God's message of justice. We name sin. We turn toward justice. We stand in the wilderness, pointing to the one more powerful than us. As the psalmist writes, "Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet." Where righteousness and peace are actively enacted, God is there.

Isaiah 40:1-11

The book of Isaiah is one of the most well-known and well-loved prophetic books of the Old Testament. Scholars tend to recognize four major divisions within the book: First Isaiah (Chapters 1-39), Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-56), Third Isaiah (Chapters 56-66), and the Isaiah Apocalypse (Chapters 24-27).

Our reading for today comes from the very beginning of Second Isaiah. This section of the book is thought to have been written while the people of Jerusalem were in exile in Babylon. The major focus of the section is the people's return from exile back to Jerusalem under the Persian King Cyrus.

The passage for today, often associated with the iconic Handel's "Messiah," deals directly with the question "What will the community's role be in the return from exile?"

The community returning from exile is called upon to be active agents, to be comforters. The people fully acknowledge the fall of Jerusalem and the exile as a major failure. But – and this is important – they were never abandoned by God in the process. They've gone into exile, they've "served their terms" and "paid the penalties." Now it is time to go home.

A major theme of the Second-Isaiah community is the idea of recreating the old to be something new – a new creation, a new Israel, etc. Verses 3-4, which are later quoted in the gospels, conjure up an image of a new exodus. But this time the exodus will be easier – the valleys will be lifted up, the mountains made low, and so on. This time, the journey will be straighter and easier.

Verse 6 illustrates the struggle of the community to move forward with their return to Jerusalem, their new exodus. The voice in the wilderness is told to cry out, but "What shall I cry?" the voice asks.

The answer, an oft-heard scriptural line, is that people will pass away and fade, but the Word of the Lord will stand forever (v. 8). Thus, the job of the people is to trust in God, to return home and to spread the Word of the Lord from the mountaintops, so that Jerusalem will be a beacon for all.

- The Second-Isaiah community was preparing for a long journey, a journey home. Reflect on your own journeys in life of returning home. Is home a place you can go? A place you want to go or want to avoid?
- What gives you strength on this literal or metaphorical journey?
- As you prepare to enter into the Christmas season, a season filled with memories and experiences of home, I invite you to remember the words of Isaiah that “the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of the Lord will stand forever.”

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

The Bible is rich with imagery, poetry and prose about people and their relationship to the land. This psalm often mentions the land, naming it as God’s in verse 1, and then exhorting that the glory of God will “dwell in our land” (v. 9). An increase in harvest would signal that God, indeed, had blessed the land (v. 12). Thus, for the people of the time when the psalms were written, and for us today, the land is integrally tied up in our relationship to God. When people turn their hearts to God, and when love and faithfulness meet, then “faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky” (vv. 10-11). Even the earth and the skies will join us in our song of praise and faith.

- In what ways would you treat the land differently if you saw it as God’s? How would you treat it differently if you saw the land as a companion in the work of praising God?
- This psalm is full of often-used words like “faithfulness” and “righteousness.” How would you define these words in your own language, not in the language of the church? Try describing these words in terms of your five senses. What would faithfulness taste like? Look like? Feel like? And so on.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Peter’s second epistle is one of the shorter books of the Bible, focusing on the responsibilities of Christians as they wait for the end times. The apostle Peter, the named and likely author, is concerned about the actions of Christians as they wait

for the Second Coming. Early Christians understandably thought Christ was coming imminently, “like a thief in the night,” but they had to adjust their message when they realized that Christ’s coming was perhaps not quite so imminent.

Second Peter echoes a theme we heard from the Second-Isaiah community, anticipating a “new heaven” and a “new earth.” But while the people and the churches wait for this newness, Peter exhorts them to live lives of integrity, without “spot or blemish.” Peter emphasizes the importance of patience in the Christian journey. Peter likely wrote this book soon before his martyrdom, which adds a level of drama to his message, making it somewhat like a last will and testament. Also, it is interesting to note that Second Peter quotes extensively from the Book of Jude, which likely points to Jude as a major source for the epistle.

- In verse 8, Peter speaks of the different way in which God views time. Peter stresses that time is different for God, and that ultimately God is patient and wants us to grow and develop. What in your life has God been patient with you about? What do you need to continue to develop within yourself and your Christian life?
- In verse 14, Peter asks Christians to live “without spot or blemish” as they wait for the end times. What in your life feels like it could be a “spot or blemish”? What spiritual practices might “clean” those spots and blemishes?

Mark 1:1-8

The Gospel of Mark is considered by most scholars to be the first gospel written, and subsequently the source for the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Notably Mark’s gospel doesn’t begin with a birth narrative, but instead begins with the introduction of John the Baptist. Scriptural quotations and Old Testament allusions are woven all throughout the gospels, and this is no exception. Mark’s use of Isaiah establishes John the Baptist as a prophet, and Jesus as the Messiah who will come. Later in the passage, the mention of John’s camel’s hair clothing and diet of locusts and honey is likely meant as an allusion to Elijah, another major prophet of 2 Kings (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8a). While most modern readers miss these allusions, they serve to enrich the gospel text by rooting it in tradition.

John the Baptist is serving a crucial role by paving the way for Jesus. He will baptize people with water, but Jesus will come and baptize people with the Holy

Spirit. John paves the way with humility, emphasizing that he's less powerful than the one who will come after him.

Something else to note: The opening verses of the Gospel of Mark set the stage for the entire story of the life of Jesus. Mark is the earliest gospel, and scholars believe Matthew and Luke drew on it. It begins late in Jesus' life, at the beginning of his ministry. The first verse announces the theme of the "good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." "Christ" and "the Son of God" both carry political connotations in their original context that may be obscure for modern congregations. "Christ" is well known as the Greek translation of the Hebrew term "Messiah," or "Anointed One," which refers to a king or priest. "Son of God" was not a "theological" term in our modern sense, but one of the political titles of the Roman emperors since Augustus.

- Jesus had John the Baptist to "cry out in the wilderness" and "make the paths straight." Who in your life has played this role? Who has paved the way for you in your journeys?
- Thinking in a larger context, what historical figures do you think have paved the way for our faith and for Jesus Christ? Do you think this is still a relevant role to be filled in our modern times?
- What would it look like to pave the way for Christ today?