

3rd Sunday of Advent
12.11.22

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (489)

And now he had come.

The world had been waiting, and now he had come.

We've been waiting, these last two weeks, Advent the season of waiting, yet into which also Jesus comes.

John had been waiting, if not for him to come then certainly for him to get about the business of being the Messiah, being the one whom John foretold would come as a force to a ferociously unjust world.

John was in prison.

He was there because he'd been saying Herod's marriage was unlawful. Herod, insecure Herod, terrible, brutal Herod, whose wife had once been married to his brother. He'd either had his brother killed and taken his wife, or his father had had his brother killed so he could take his wife, or Herodias had divorced her first husband in preference for this one, none of which was lawful, all of which John said. A lot. John said that a lot, apparently anyway.

Herod didn't like hearing it. Herodias (said wife) liked it even less.

So, he was imprisoned, John was; and yet he was also kept close, in the prison of the palace because Herod liked to hear John talk. So goes the story, that "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him, and when he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him."

Herod, it seems, was ambivalent, indecisive in his doings.

John wasn't.

We met him last week, as you might remember, John the baptizer, Jesus' cousin. Wearing clothing of rough camel's hair, eating food of the wilderness, John was the son of a Temple priest, but a descendant also of Aaron, brother of Moses, and so one of the two original wilderness prophets. John would take up that mantle and wouldn't look back.

John attracted crowds, people coming from all over to the edge of the river Jordan for a baptism of repentance and a foretelling of the one who was to come.

That people came from all over shouldn't suggest, though, that John was about buttering up crowds. No, he called these crowds to account, and he foretold that the one coming would be as fierce as he, and even more so. The one to come would carry a winnowing fork, would be in the world as clearing a threshing floor, would throw what chaff he cleared into unquenchable fire.

The world wouldn't know what had hit it. "Wrath to come," is how John phrased what he imagined Jesus would bring, Jesus who was coming.

And now he had come.

And now John was in prison, imprisoned by a stupid, weak, dangerous tyrant.

So now would be a good time to start all that winnowing and threshing and clearing. Now was a good time for wrath.

"Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Not that we should imagine John as cowering in prison. No, he was no reed shaken by the wind, no gentle man wrapped in soft robes. No. But he might have been confused by what was

happening, and by what was *not*. Or worse. He might have been angry. Humiliated? Let down. Really.

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

Which is to say, you’re not what we were expecting. You’re not what we were promised.

Because Jesus, until this point in Matthew’s gospel, has been busy with this sort of thing: healing a Centurion’s son (that is, a Roman soldier’s son), healing a demoniac in the region of Gerasa (that is, a Gentile region). He healed many people at Peter’s house, and he called a tax collector to be one of his disciples. (A tax collector, like, might as well have been a mobster.) He raised a girl who seemed dead and stopped a woman from her long hemorrhage.

And, see, none of these Romans, Gentiles, women, children were worthy of any such visit from the Messiah.

He’d also calmed a storm and warned that what conflict he would bring to the world wasn’t a matter of vengeance but of family division, widespread disagreement about whether Jesus was worthy of following or not.

And it was beginning to seem like, maybe, not...?

As for what he hadn’t done, well, he hadn’t driven out the Roman occupation, he hadn’t liberated the unjustly imprisoned, he hadn’t made it so humiliated Israel and Judea would once again have their day in the sun.

But: “He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” That’s what they were promised; that’s the word of promise that had stood for half a millennium now.

It was 500 years earlier that this word came to Isaiah, during the time prior to the exile, prior to when Babylon attacked. But everyone knew it was coming. So, the people were readying themselves for a fight. They figured they might even win—what with the Lord on their side and all.

Around the same long-ago time, the prophet Jeremiah counseled otherwise. He said the people should flee instead of fight. He even dared to suppose the Lord might be with Babylon on this one. That the people had lived for too long unjustly. That their society had been for too long out of synch with God’s aim—for justice, for public policy made in a spirit of lovingkindness. Time was up for this iteration of the Lord’s nation.

That’s what Jeremiah supposed.

Isaiah, though, held out hope that the Lord hadn’t given up on the people. The wilderness and the dry land would yet be glad; the desert would yet rejoice and blossom. Waters would break

forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand would become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. And the ransomed of the Lord would return, would come to Zion with singing. The eyes of the blind would be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, and everlasting joy would be upon their heads.

It's just that—

It's just that the time horizon for God's acting on the people's behalf was less immediate than they'd probably thought. The prophecy of Isaiah endured through the fall of the Temple and Jerusalem, through the exile in Babylon, through to the return and the time of rebuilding, not just one prophet Isaiah but a whole prophetic school that spoke in prophetic truth-telling over this 150-year span of time.

And then, five hundred years later, things were dire again and this ancient prophetic word seemed to speak urgently again.

Or maybe things had always been dire...? Maybe things are always dire. Just depends on where you touch down to take a look.

So, a promise of a new reign, of new hope for Zion.

They had waited.

They had waited.

And now he had come.

John sent word by way of his disciples, for John too had disciples, these which are students. Lots of teachers had them. He sent word from prison, because he had thought, here was the one.

And yet, maybe not?

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

Which is to say, you're not what we were expecting. You're not what we were promised.

So, what?

No coincidence, I'm sure. No mere sloppy oversight, what Jesus left off in listing what works he'd done in alignment with the promise. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” This, of course, is what he left off: that he'd been doling out terrible recompense, that he'd been acting in vengeance. Instead, there was this:

“...blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

I read somewhere recently an important point that I now can't find. I've looked through the underlined passages of several of the books I've recently read. No avail. I can't find it. This

point, which I'd otherwise credit: that Jesus, in all these interpersonal healings and restorings and little acts of salvation suggests something about how God respects the individual person and how such respect is essential in the work of God's redemption and salvation of the world.

God doesn't act upon people, but upon persons. God doesn't initiate a mass movement but instead an interpersonal appeal to the human heart—this one and that one.

It's not a point that would have landed so profoundly in my hearing except that my reading just prior to that had had me in the world of totalitarianism—Hannah Arendt, Masha Gessen. And I even said to you from this very pulpit about my reading the very long and very profound *Origins of Totalitarianism* that, slow as I had been taking it so as not to miss any of Arendt's brilliance, I finally got to the point where I just had to finish it. It was too sad, I remember thinking, I remember saying. The impersonal, bureaucratic exercising of power with terror had the intended and very real, and apparently irreversible, effect of making of the human being in its sights rather a mass man, someone bound as with iron chains to others of his type (which is everyone) while also isolated, terrified, destructively lonely, and alienated even from his own mind (or *her* own mind, but the fact of women is another issue altogether).

And I've heard it said that Jesus was frustratingly small in his going about being a miraculous healer. I've heard it said (and not just by his cousin John) that those limited and ultimately very few acts of faith-healings: what were those about? Maybe just to impress us? Maybe just to get everyone's attention? Because, when you think about it, these were pretty inadequate to the task at hand—a world full of unwell people, a world full of the sick and dying.

But, listen, to come at the world as if what it needed was a mass movement—and even if a movement with aims we approve of (social justice, economic equality)—is to come at it as the devil is told to have tempted it. “Make these stones to bread,” the implication being that now everyone can eat, and at Jesus' hand! “Throw yourself down from the Temple's highest point, and watch as angels save you,” the aim being that Jesus' power would be unmistakable and oh, so irresistible—and isn't that what we all want?

Worse, though, than some old-fashioned story featuring some character half of us don't really believe in is the more recent history of how such mass movements play out. They destroy human beings. They leave in their place hollow embodiments of lonely fear.

The smallness of Jesus' acts of healing, so small, so local: this wasn't a bug in the God's move to become one person in one place at one moment in history, it was a feature. And it is to suggest how those of us who'd like to continue to live in the resurrection of this one person should

go about doing so—not in attempting to organize a mass movement but in appealing to one another, neighbor and stranger alike, with lovingkindness and embodied care. And not with an agenda that such deeds will lead to some desired response but because in such deeds is the kingdom of God come, is the life of Christ enacted.

I don't know if Jesus felt sorry that the message to send back to John was likely not what John wanted to hear. I imagine he did, but maybe that's just me. I hate disappointing people, though the way of life I've chosen for myself (because I sense in some way it has called me) is a matter of disappointing people, but at a rate they can handle. That's what pastoral ministry is said to be: a matter of disappointing people but at a rate they can handle. One thing that's important to remember, though, is that Jesus wasn't me. So maybe he didn't feel sorry that the disciples of John would have to return to him with news that was perhaps disappointing, very-very disappointing.

What we do know is that John wouldn't live much longer in that prison, that he would all too soon be executed by Herod and Herodias acting as the powerful, reckless, destructive people they seem to have been. And it would perhaps come to those same disciples to go collect John's body from the palace prison, beheaded as it now was, brought gruesomely low.

Jesus couldn't do much to make it so historical tragedy didn't befall his own cousin—though I imagine he'd have like to have done.

I mean, what is the savior of the world for if not that?

It is for this: the opening of a way of love, a way that any of us are free to enact at any given moment on any given day.

It is for this, an ever-widening taking up of the blessed challenge of making our lives all about love—each of us which is the only good way to get to all.

And it is for this: to assure a desperate, hungry, fearful world that such acts of inter-relational love are the means by which the world is saved. We can work, and rest, assured that nothing greater than this is required—lovingkindness, embodied care—for the world to be saved of its violence, saved of its disease. For anything “greater” than this is but a perpetuation of that violence, a reenacting of that disease. Overpowering, even with purported good aim, is still abuse, is still violence.

John hadn't yet fully come to this knowledge—and for that he can be forgiven. He was, after all, someone deeply needful at this point, and he hadn't yet witnessed God's full intention in the life of Christ, which intention is most fully realized on the cross. No, wouldn't he witness this—

not in the world's time anyway. Ever the herald of Jesus, sent to go before, John would go to his own gruesome death first as well.

As for us, our time of such learning, of such new wisdom and understanding, is now. Our time of indeed repentance is now—which repentance means a turning and a change of mind, an enlarging of our imaginations to perceive how God is at work, and how he is not. The pettiness of our hopes, the ugly vengeance of our agendas, we must lay aside. Something more immediate has come, more pressing. Something more bewildering and wondrous. It provokes our attention. It evokes our care. A baby.

A new person whose vulnerability moves us to love.

That's God.

That's how God manifests, and God works.

Have you ever heard of anything more baffling, more bizarre?

A baby. Like, what are we supposed to do with that?

But take care, I guess.

And nurture.

And love—and perhaps not just this baby but also one another, as we were each once a baby such as this. That loving hush that befalls when a newborn fills a room.

Just a couple more weeks, our waiting, our waiting—a sign of how God will work salvation. In this whole world, one soft bundle at a time.

Okay, then.

Thanks be to God.