

Sermon: Advent V

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 7, 2014

Year B

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Our first reading today is listed as being from Isaiah... but it's actually from Second Isaiah... or Deutero-Isaiah... Chapters 1 - 39 of Isaiah were written about 800 years before Jesus was born... Second Isaiah... beginning with today's Chapter 40... was composed at about 539 BCE... at the end of the Babylonian Exile and during the early period after it... composed just before... or just after... the fall of Babylon to the Persians... the Messiah Cyrus... yes... he was referred to as Messiah... had just issued his decree allowing the Jews to return to Zion... they hadn't been in captivity... nearly as long as their ancestors had been enslaved in Egypt... but at *that* time there had been no Temple... no center *per se* of Jewish life... but for these exiles... the destruction of the Temple had happened only about seventy years beforehand... it was fresh and sharp in their collective and individual and memory... and the pain of losing it was still fresh too...

During their captivity... the Jews... codified much of the Five Books of Moses... they seem to have realized that the destruction of the Temple and their exile was God's punishment for their sin... and they wanted to make sure this kind of thing would never happen again... even God acknowledged that they had received double for their sins...

Now... the author of Chapter 40... who wrote in the prophet Isaiah's name... offers tender words... gives assurances in v. 2... God tells the prophet to comfort God's people... to speak tenderly to Jerusalem... and cry to her that she has served her term... that sins are forgiven... and that they will have a new beginning...

Now the Presence of God... God's Glory... which left the Holy of Holies... will accompany them on their journey back home... a highway will be prepared... every hill will be made low... and every valley will be raised...

Remember... this is the first time in Jewish understanding that a geographically bound city-god had left it's city... Ezekiel 10 tells of an omnipresent God leaving the Holy of Holies... and going to be with God's people in Babylon... while remaining in Zion too...

When God says: *Proclaim!*... and the prophet asks *What shall I proclaim?*... God says *people are grass... and grass withers... and flowers fade*... when God says this... God is referring to the Babylonian conquerors... who will disappear... preparing the way for Cyrus... preparing the way for the exiles to return home... God's word will endure...

In v. 9... God tells the prophet to let Jerusalem know that God will arrive soon... normally a herald would let the city know that an army is approaching... but here... God arrives as a gentle shepherd... not to destroy but to protect...

These words of promise and assurance... of protection and good tidings... stand in contrast to what we've heard for the past four weeks... and now... Mark begins a story that has no ending... he begins his Gospel like a breathless messenger... who's eager to make an unexpected announcement... about the beginning of the Good News of Jesus... and he echoes the same prophetic images from Second Isaiah... *Prepare the way of the Lord... make his paths straight*... what begins in Mark had already begun in Second Isaiah...

For many reasons... not all of them good ones I think... we humans focus more on perfection... than on God's mercy and forgiveness... on the idea of flawlessness instead of on the reality of humanity... we hold people accountable for things over which they have no power... and in many ways... we think there ought to be no accidents... but part of where we go wrong... I think... is when we take sound bytes from scripture...

like... *Be perfect... therefore... as your heavenly Father is perfect...* and today's phrase from 2 Peter... *strive to be found by him at peace... without spot or blemish...* and think we ought to be more than we can possibly be... we think that the bars we set for ourselves will never be too high... that we will always have everything together... that we won't forget anything... that everything we do will be perfectly choreographed and integrated... and it will all smell like roses...

But in the Greek... *perfect* can also mean ripened... mature... whole... or complete... it's our modern understanding of *being without error...* that trips us up... we acknowledge that only God is perfect... but then we beat ourselves up when we make mistakes... or when something in our lives is flawed... or broken... like a cracked clay pot...

It's taken a long time for me to get to where I am... I've got some scars from accidents... and a few from surgeries... but most of the scars I carry are in here [move hands] somewhere... wounds that have tempered me... strengthened me... but which have left a mark... a crack... but I'm still ripening... maturing... I've got more work to do... and yet I believe that God couldn't possibly love me any more than God already does... not because I'm perfect... but because God is love...

Do you know that the Japanese people... have a beautiful way to repair broken ceramic bowls... or other pieces... the process dates from the mid-15th century... when the Emperor asked his craftsmen to find a way to repair a broken cup... to make the cup look as good as new... or even better... and they invented a process called *kintsugi*... which in Japanese means golden seams... and so rather than trying to hide the original break, they filled the cracks with gold dust and glue... and the cracks then look like solid gold... so although the original flaw is still visible... the piece often looks more beautiful... and valuable than it originally was... this is what it is to be human... to have cracks... and to be repaired by Jesus...

Theologian John Shea writes... as a prophet... John's primary work is freeing people from their identification with sin... he does this through a call to change their minds... and behaviors... and to enact and experience this change in baptism... this is a strenuous undertaking... it entails courageous self-examination... and it can be a rigorous and exhausting affair... to authentically undergo baptism... is to experience a dizzying sense of freedom... to shake off the shackles of the past... to walk away from destructive habits and alliances... to say "no" to what has driven someone for so long... *could* seem like the finish line... a successful conclusion to a long process...

But John doesn't want them to think this... baptism is just the beginning... there's still a path to travel... a path that needs to be raised... lowered... and straightened... But is it the path *on which we move towards God*... or... as we let go of that which no longer serves us well... as we identify less with our sins... when we let go of notions of perfection... and become like grapes ripening in the sun... are we simply able to know the God who has been with us all along... closer than our very breath itself...

John baptized them with water... but they needed to be baptized with the Holy Spirit... they needed... as we do... to not throw away the things... or the people... that have cracks... even Jesus... in his resurrected body... bore the wounds of crucifixion... they needed to fill the cracks in their lives with golden love... and let them ripen... this is what it means to be human... and divine. This is the Good News of Jesus... that began even before the Word became flesh... it is the never ending story... and it begins for us in every moment.

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