

"Isaiah and John"

Luke 3: 1-6

Advent 2C, Boise, 2021 (after Redding, 2009; Ft Collins & Cheyenne, 2004)

Today, on the 2nd Sunday in Advent, we turn our attention to the Baptist. John the Forerunner's sermons came from two sources, the Book of the Prophet Malachi and the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. His scary, fiery rhetoric was taken mainly from Malachi, whose prophecy of "the messenger of the covenant" we had in our OT reading. We will hear more about that next Sunday. The *other* side of the Baptist's message, his words of comfort, he took mainly from Isaiah. John repeated the part of Isaiah's message intended for the Jews exiled in Babylon. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

King Nebuchadnezzar and his troops, after a long siege, had entered Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon's temple, pulled down its walls, captured the Jewish King Zedekiah, burned down his palace, and put out his eyes. The inhabitants were bound in chains and marched hundreds of miles north and then east to central Mesopotamia. Their captivity there lasted roughly 70 years, fulfilling a prophecy made by Jeremiah. But the Jews in Babylon who listened and paid attention to the Isaian prophecies, which they heard read to them in their synagogues in exile, had hope. They learned from them that one day their captivity would end, and they would be permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its temple and walls. "Comfort my people," God instructed his prophets. "Comfort my people, and "speak comfortably to Jerusalem" also. Tell the city "that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her

sins." Listen, even now there is a voice from afar, crying in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." The time is near when the exiles will be returning, when they will rebuild the city and reestablish the Throne of David. Then, the marketplace will teem with people, brides and bridegrooms will make merry with their guests, and the sound of laughter will be heard again, the laughter of children playing in the streets.

I imagine that this prophecy sounded so delightful to the ears of those in captivity, so full of hope to people who had suffered much, that at some point they decided the prophecy ought to be sung. -- And people are still singing it today. In the nine verses that open the 40th chapter of Isaiah, we have quite a number of really good songs, which some in our choir will sing on the weekend after next in the Master Chorale's performance of the *Messiah* at the Cathedral of the Rockies.

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.

Or take the next verse:

And the *glory* of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

And then a few verses later in the prophecy, the *other* cities of Judah receive the news from Jerusalem. Speak louder, they demand.

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into a high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, *lift* up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold, your God.

The exiles are returning, and it is the LORD's doing. Surely, this is something to sing about -- in Hebrew in the 6th century before Christ, and English in the 21st century dating from His Birth. The joyous music of Isaiah has echoed and re-echoed throughout the ages.

The tunes that we today use for his message, as you know, come from Handel. The *Messiah* was first performed in the Anglican cathedral in Dublin. It was commissioned by the cathedral's dean, the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift. The libretto consists entirely of verses taken from the KJV of the Bible. I think we can be very glad that the Rev. Dr. Swift provided the money but did not work on the libretto himself and thus spoil it with his sarcasm. For although it is shame enough that Richard Strauss wrote an opera in which John the Baptist was the object of Salome's amorous desires, I fear that Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, might have turned him into a smart aleck.

In the Gospel that we read today, John is singing Isaiah's song to the exiles, and it is a beautiful one. "Prepare the way of the Lord." Prepare it again; for our God will visit in far grander fashion than He did in either the exodus out of Egypt or the return from Babylon. This time He will take us across the desert into His *Kingdom*, the Kingdom that will have no end.

We see time and again in our study of Bible that, when the prophecies of the Old Testament were initially fulfilled in the history of Israel, disappointment often followed. When the Jews returned from exile, they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and its temple, but it took them quite a long time to do so. They met with opposition from the surrounding nations, and encountered a lot of imperial red tape back in Mesopotamia and Persia.

They got the job done all right, but only after a series of frustrating interruptions. Then, as Ezra tells the story, when the last stone of the Temple was finally put in place, the people looked at the work and said, "Oh, is that all there?" The older Jews said, "This surely doesn't look like the Temple Solomon built!" Zerubbabel, David's heir, was not the king of an independent nation, but rather a provincial governor of the Persian Empire. It became evident that Israel's glory years were all in the past.

So how accurate were the prophecies? A lot of Jews were no doubt asking that question. But when we study the matter, we find that *disappointment* is very often the means by which God chooses to work. The first time around, a prophecy is sometimes fulfilled only partially, and then the disappointment sets in. When people become aware that what they have gotten isn't exactly what was promised, then they either give up hope or begin looking for *another* fulfillment. And that was how nearly all the messianic prophecies worked. The Jews thought they would get their leader, along with a kingdom greater than Solomon's, in the near future, within the lifetime of the people who first received the prophecy. They certainly had those expectations following an event so grand as the return of the exiles from Babylon. But then no great leader arrived, and the Jews, when they did gain their independence under the Maccabees, were only a small city-state struggling for its survival against the empires that surrounded it. Finally, in the first century B.C., Pompey made a sweep through the region, and Judaea was made a province of the Roman Empire.

That was the state of affairs when John came out of his hermitage in the desert and began preaching at the Jordan River. Israel was *again* looking

for its Messiah, a descendant of David who would win back its independence and finally fulfill the prophecies — *really* fulfill them. And so the Isaian prophecies were again brought to the fore. Isaiah and Malachi and all the other prophets in Israel's history were speaking again through the preaching of John. "The Messiah and His Kingdom are near. Don't look for them in the future. They are *at hand!*"

In Jesus of Nazareth, Israel finally got its Messiah, and so did we. God allowed the people to suffer disappointment when the first fulfillments of the prophecies proved to be only partial. God allowed this so that the Jews would not be content with small achievements and would instead look for the greater work He was intending to do through Israel and her Messiah. We should be familiar with that kind of fruitful frustration from our own experience. It is not uncommon for God *not* to give us the first thing we ask for in prayer, because He desires to give us something much better, something that lies wholly beyond our present expectations. Frustration and disappointment can be the very means by which God prepares us for a greater gift. We must first be led to doubt and question our current plans before we will receive a mission that is truly great, one that takes us somewhere far beyond where we dreamed we could go. This is often the case with God's people today, and it was *certainly* the case in the time just before the appearance of the Christ at the Jordan River where John was baptizing.

God was, through his prophet, getting His people ready for His greatest work of all in the history of mankind. It was a work greater than His deliverance of them from the pharaoh's bondage in Egypt, greater also than

His bringing them back to Jerusalem from their place of exile in Mesopotamia, and greater than what might have been performed by a messiah with a nationalistic program. This next work was to be even greater than the creation. The work that God finally wrought through His Messiah was a *new* Exodus, a *new* deliverance from exile, and a *new* creation which in every way surpassed the first. In the three years that followed the Baptism of the Christ, concluding with His death and resurrection, God was leading not only the Jews but the whole of mankind from the Devil's domain and into His glorious Kingdom — out of spiritual bondage to the land of the living and the free. Through His Christ He was bringing us all from exile, which is not our captivity in a physical city. Rather, God was delivering both the Jews and us from our longer, deeper exile outside of Eden. He was returning us to the Tree of Life, from which, if we eat, we may obtain immortality and fellowship with the Creator.

The message of St John, then, in this and every other Advent, is that we *all* are in bonds, we are all captives, we all languish in exile -- in Egypt, in Babylon, in all places on earth east of Eden. The people God has chosen for His own, as the medieval hymn states, mourn "in lonely exile here/ Until the Son of God appear." Exile is the state of even the believer, until he or she is delivered from the conditions of the Fall. Let us not become resigned to our imprisonment. Let us not grow accustomed to chains. The voice that cries in the wilderness is bearing a message, and the message is intended for us. "Behold, your God!" He is coming! His Kingdom is at hand! Salvation is here!

