

“A Prophet’s Promise”

December 7, 2014

Christ Comes! Series – 2nd Sunday in Advent

Today we move from plea to promise. Remember Isaiah’s serious plea for God to tear open the heavens and come down – to fix our brokenness and forgive our sin - to trust God as the Potter and we as the clay.

Now today, we rewind to the time when the Israelites are in exile. Isaiah assures them that God will deliver them and lead them home. What a message for people who literally saw no hope! They had been taken away from their land, the Temple, and their way of life. Some believed the exile was punishment for straying away from God. They needed a word of comfort, but this sounded impossible! Isaiah says that God will forgive their sin. The journey into exile had been difficult on the Israelites. Their time in exile was hard – trying to keep their religious traditions alive. But Isaiah says that the way home will be made clear.

God will make a way from Babylon back to Jerusalem, and it will be smooth – valleys raised up, mountains and hills made low, rough ground will be level. Beautiful images, powerful images. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed – and all people shall see it! Everyone will know that God is with us! Everyone will know that God is powerful and mighty to save!

I’m sure that some doubted the prophet. After all, they’d been in Babylon for two generations – and this was going to happen now? But there’s the promise – that God’s Word stands forever. Even though they have been under Babylon’s rule, it is no match for God’s power. And even better, God is their shepherd who will lead them home with love.

Isaiah’s prophecy to the Israelites is supposed to offer comfort, but it requires incredibly strong faith. They had to have faith in something that seemed utterly impossible. And as we encounter Isaiah today, we have to trust in God’s power to save.

Remember that Advent was first a season of fasting and a time of preparation for baptism. We who are waiting have to be prepared to receive the Lord, and this message from Isaiah comes again when John the Baptist comes to prepare people for Jesus’ ministry. John said that repentance and being baptized were the way to be prepared because Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God would come.

And that’s where we need to start. We need to repent – to turn around and go back to God. Repentance isn’t God’s idea of a downer. It’s not about

putting ourselves down. It's about being who God calls us to be. We turn from sin that keeps us separated from God, and we find freedom and peace. We find hope. We find joy. Frederick Buechner says, "True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'"

In the midst of waiting for a Messiah and the comfort of God's presence, in the midst of our waiting for the coming of Jesus, we have to be prepared – even to the deepest part of our hearts. We stand on the verge of ignoring Jesus' coming and forgetting to prepare ourselves to receive him again. We want the joy of Christmas without looking at ourselves.

The idea of preparing a way for the Lord comes from the actual practice of repairing the road when a person of royal status was planning to visit. People made sure the way was clear and easy to travel.

I keep thinking about that phrase "prepare the way of the Lord" - "prepare for God's arrival!" As a colleague of mine said, "God just will not go away!" Christ comes. Even amid news of protests amid the outcome of another grand jury decision...news of a young boy dead...news of violence on a train...news of people bracing for a typhoon. Christ comes!

"Prepare the way for the Lord..." Church, what is our role? We may not live in New York or Cleveland or Niles or the Philippines, but what is our response? What is our prayer? I'm not sure I have the answer, but I was deeply moved by our youth this weekend at the Singing Christmas Tree. I saw joy as they sang. I heard a message of peace and hope. "You, who preach a way that's narrow, have a love that reaches wide." Words written in the 1850s before the Civil War: "O Holy Father, I will be a child of peace and purity; for well I know Thy hand will bless the seeker after righteousness." And words from an African song: "Jesus has come to live with us/ If you want to know the Child/ You have to come kneel." Prepare the way for the Lord...

We want comfort this time of year. We like the comfort of familiar songs, of shopping, of giving and receiving gifts, of decorations, of traditions. In three weeks we'll gather here and sing and light candles. But will it mean anything more than any other year? Are we just going through the motions again? Or will we allow God to prepare us? Will we allow God to confront us and challenge us to turn to him again?

When we come to this table, we are searching for comfort. There's something familiar here – **we** know how to do it – but we don't always know what **God** will do at this table. So, coming to Holy Communion – coming to

commune with God – is ultimately an act of faith. It's an act of hope in God. It's an act of preparation for the coming of Christ.

So what will God do in you today? How might God prepare the way so that we can truly receive the gift of Jesus Christ? What are the valleys that need to be raised up – encouragement for your life and a reminder of how much God loves you – yes, even you!?

What are the mountains that need to be brought low – places of pride and unforgiveness that keep us from truly knowing the depth of God's love for us? What are the rough places that need to be made smooth – situations and relationships that we don't give over to God because we think we can handle it, bad habits that plague us? Where do you see the promises of God coming true, or where do you hope to see God working?

Friends, we all seek and hunger for God's comfort. And Isaiah is clear that true comfort in God cannot come without an honest, open heart. How can we welcome a Savior if we don't think we need one? We have to come before God as we are – sinners who need God's grace – if we truly want to experience the comfort of a God who invites, embraces, forgives, and saves us through the love of Jesus Christ.

I love to watch faces when we receive Communion. Somehow this meal makes repentance a gift. We come to the same table. We're all in need. We have different physical and emotional needs, but we all need God's grace offered in this meal. We all need to prepare the way for Christ.

This meal is an invitation for us to come as we are and leave the table transformed by the deep, abiding love of God, the One who comfort us and cares for us like a Shepherd. We're invited to come. We're invited to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. AMEN.