

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Second Sunday of Advent • December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40:1-11 • Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 • 2 Peter 3:8-15a • Mark 1:1-8

In Confirmation class last week, we talked about vocation. About the ways we live out our faith in the world. About how we participate in God's work of redeeming and renewing creation in the seemingly ordinary corners of our lives. About how we respond to God's callings given to us in baptism. The Bible is full of stories about people who are called by God. In two weeks, we'll be hearing one of those call stories, when the angel Gabriel tells Mary about God's plan for her child to be the messiah. And Mary responds with that simple but great statement of faith, "Let it be with me according to your will." This is a good call story, but, let's be honest, it's also a little hard to believe. A little unrealistic. Hard to believe not because of the virgin birth stuff but because when God calls Mary to a vocation that will change not just her life but the life of the whole creation, Mary says, "Okay."

So we talked about a different call story instead. One that feels a little more realistic. When God appears to Moses at the burning bush and tells him to go lead the Israelites of slavery in Egypt. And Moses responds, in the original Hebrew, "Uh, I'm not doing that." Eventually, of course, Moses agrees to go, but not without a fight that drags on for two chapters. "Let it be according to your will," Moses says, "but I'd prefer if you let it be with someone else."

Today's reading from Isaiah is another one of those call stories that don't unfold so neatly. That's a little more complicated. But it's also one that's a little more realistic. It's one of the most powerful call stories that we have. It's so powerful, so important, that when St. Mark wanted to tell the story of Jesus, he started by remixing these words from Isaiah. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah..." If you want to understand Jesus, Mark says, if you want to understand who Jesus is and why Jesus matters, you can't just start on Christmas.

To understand why this Isaiah passage is so powerful, to understand why Mark wanted to frame his gospel with it, you have to understand the setting. I'll spare you the whole history lesson I gave you last week, but around six hundred years before Jesus is born, the Israelites are conquered and marched out of their homes into Babylon. And it's this hugely traumatic event for the Israelites. When they get there, all anyone wants to do is go back home. All anyone wants to do is get back in the covenant relationship. They hope that maybe God can do something to change their situation. And then time starts to go by. And after a while they have kids. And those kids have kids. And over time, from generation to generation, the culture starts to change. And by the time today's reading was written, the people had given up on any idea of ever going back home. Of going back to their homeland and of going back into the covenant with God. Because if you were born in Babylon, if you were born in exile, if you were born in that darkness, then it's all you've ever known.

The Israelites had a story about themselves once. About how God had led them out of slavery into the promised land. About how God was present in the temple to be worshipped. About how they were God's chosen people. And even when the Israelites first go into exile, that story holds up for a while. Even when they lament, when they rage against the Babylonians, they still bother to take their complaints to God. But over time that starts to change. Over time they get worn down. The constant harassment. The anti-Jewish jeering. The sheer weight of living under occupation. And so that old story starts to slip away. Forget about the homeland. Forget about the temple. Forget about the covenant. All they want to do is get by. And there's no shortage of people telling the Israelites just that. To move on from their old stories. To move on from their traditions. To move on from their hopes for the future.

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One of the interesting things about the book of Isaiah is that it's actually three different books that were written by a bunch of different people. Isaiah isn't a book as much as it is a school of thought. The first book was written before the Israelites went into exile, when the prophet was trying to warn them about how their constant misdeeds and rebellion against God were going to have disastrous consequences. So the problem for that Isaiah is how do you get them to not take their covenant with God for granted? The third book, which we heard last week, is about how the Israelites were to come back after the exile. So the problem for that Isaiah is how to rebuild this community after the exile experience.

Today's reading from Isaiah comes from that second book, and it's actually the very beginning of it. These chapters are normally called the "Babylonian chapters" because they're about the experience of living in exile. And this Isaiah has a very different problem. Unlike that first Isaiah trying to call attention to the people's rebelliousness or that third Isaiah trying to help them rebuild after the exile, this Isaiah has to help the Israelites get through this exile experience, this dark time in their history. And in today's reading Isaiah has a very specific question: how do you hope when you've been in the dark so long that your eyes have gotten used to it?

That's a hard question. And that's a tough crowd. A crowd that's resigned themselves to their situation. A group of people that's just thinking about how to make their lives a little bit better. We don't have time for talk about the temple or the covenant. We're just trying to get by. Maybe that feeling feels familiar to you. Because you feel like you're just trying to make a life. The Christmas season rolls around with all its lofty talk of peace and hope and joy and you're just trying to make it to Friday.

This Isaiah reading always reminds me of an article that was in the Times about ten years ago about how Denmark was the happiest country in the world. And this reporter talked to a Danish researcher about why the Danes were so happy, did they have any advice or strategies that we could learn from? And this Danish researcher said that the secret to a happy life was having low expectations.

There's a reason why the Israelites and most of us don't really care much for prophets like Isaiah. Because prophets are always pointing us toward eternal life, while all we have time for is how to make life easier. So no wonder the prophet, when called on to "Comfort, o comfort God's people," to announce that the mountains will be made low and the valley lifted up so that the people can go home, to announce that God will move heaven and earth to bring the people home, when God calls on the prophet to proclaim this good news, no wonder Isaiah says, "Uh, I'm not doing that. What am I going to say?" she responds. "The people are like grass. What could I possibly say to them? They are just trying to get by like everybody else. They've all moved on from that old story."

And as he's talking, as he's about to get into another argument with God about how this is a waste of time, the prophet seems to come to a realization. "The grass withers," she says, and "the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever."

Isaiah realizes what so many of those Israelites have forgotten. Which is that the Word of God, the promises of God, the covenant with God still stands. That they are not an abandoned people, they are still God's chosen, beloved people. Holy and beloved, precious in God's sight. That there is more to life than the Israelites believe. That they can aspire to something greater than surviving. They can believe in something more than being left alone. They can reach for something better than just not being harassed. In Isaiah's realization that the promises of God still stand, that they are still God's chosen people, there's a little flicker of light. A little light that shines into the darkness.

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This is all fine and good except it hasn't answered Isaiah's original question, "What am I to say to the people?" The covenant may still stand. The Word of God may endure. But what am I going to say? Because the people say they don't have energy to hope. They say they don't have the time to listen. So what am I going to say to them? How is Isaiah going to "Comfort, O comfort" God's people?

When we hear that Isaiah's job, Isaiah's vocation, is to comfort God's people, we probably think that Isaiah's job is to help make their life a little easier. Maybe Isaiah can offer them some advice. Or some life hacks. Or a sermon with some nice life lessons. But that's not what God tells Isaiah to say.

God doesn't tell Isaiah to say any of those things because comforting is not about making people's lives more tolerable. Comforting is about announcing the presence of God. That you are loved and cared for by God. Which, ironically, means comforting people might actually make their situation more intolerable. Because they won't believe the lies and slander that have been told about them. They won't believe that they're without worth. They won't believe that they're without a future.

Don't just try to help people get by. Don't just try to take the edge off the abuse. Don't try to get them to lower their expectations. No, God says, "Get you up to a high mountain" and say, "Here is your God." Here is your God in the breaking of the bread. Here is your God in the forgiveness of sins. Here is your God in the promise, not of a better life, not of an easier life, but in the promise of everlasting life.

Proclaim it to the people who have never known home. Proclaim it to the people who have learned to put up with it. Proclaim it to the people who have grown accustomed to the darkness. Because in your proclamation, St. Mark says, is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

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