

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on December 8, 2019 (Advent 2, Year A)

After Jesus' death and resurrection, as his disciples and followers began trying to make sense of everything that had happened, they turned to the Hebrew Scriptures. As they searched those pages, they noticed things that sounded like what they had heard and experienced in Jesus. They wove in those passages as they told stories about Jesus' life. Those passages found their way into our Gospels. They began to take on new and specific meanings for the early followers of Jesus.

But those new meanings are not the only meanings. And very often, there are treasures waiting for us in the old ones.

All four of the Gospels point to these words from the prophet Isaiah when they describe John the Baptist. "The voice of one crying out/ in the wilderness/ Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." In fact, the Gospel of John puts these words right into the Baptist's mouth. Here, in this context, they tell us that God is coming building a highway to come to us-- a highway named Jesus. John urges the crowds and us to get ourselves ready for God's arrival.

But that is not the only meaning of this passage. Isaiah's words were originally addressed to the people of Israel living in exile in Babylon. They have been forced out from land God promised to them, the land into which God delivered them. Their temple, which in the time before synagogues was their one central place of worship, of encountering God, has been destroyed. They have lost the very things that anchor their lives and give them meaning. They are longing for all that has been lost. And they are left wondering, has God been defeated? Has God abandoned them? Or worse, is there no God at all?

Here, in the original context, God uses these same words to offer compassion and reassurance to the people. God begins with the words in our sequence hymn. Comfort my people, God tells Isaiah. Speak tenderly to them. Tell them this. There is nothing that stands between you and salvation. I have not abandoned you. My Presence has never left you. I am here with you in exile. I am making a way, a highway, back home for you. I will be with you every step of the way.

We Christians rightfully celebrate that, in the birth of Jesus, God does something completely new, unexpected, and beautiful. God becomes human. And in that sense, God is coming. In fact, Advent literally means coming. But it's also true that God was always here. In fact, God tells us so again and again and again. God walks alongside Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God appears to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua, with the words, I am with you. The psalmist recognizes, "Thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Haggai repeat the refrain, "Do not be afraid, I am with you." Gabriel greets Mary by saying, "the Lord is with you." And in the final words of the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Jesus tells his disciples, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The birth of Jesus, of Emmanuel, which literally means God with us, declares in a new way what has always been true. God is with us.

But it doesn't always feel like that. In this season of Advent, we sit with our deepest longings. The world of the people of Israel, the world of the disciples, our own world is fundamentally broken in ways that are so massive and unwieldy that we feel powerless in the face of it. That's why we've been getting so much literature, and so much judgment. The

images of apocalypse and judgment reflect the longing for God to sweep in and fix this unholy mess, to end the terrible suffering and destruction and make things good and right. Come, Emmanuel. Ransom us from the exile of this sin-captive world, we sing.

This morning's reading from Isaiah offers us a beautiful vision of the very thing we are longing for—an image of a righteous world at peace with itself. Relationships of competition and domination are completely transformed into relationships of harmony and peace. The enmity that has existed between humans and snakes since that whole mess in the Garden of Eden has been dissolved. The danger to the vulnerable evaporates. The reason Isaiah gives for the transformation, the *how* of it, is that, as completely as the waters cover the sea, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. In Isaiah's vision, that is the thing that makes the difference. If we knew God, if we could begin to grasp God's love for us, and what God is doing for us, that knowledge alone would change us. In fact, it would change everything.

The complete mess we humans have made of the world is the outward manifestation of an internal reality. We ignore, shelve, and neglect God. And the more power and resources we have, the more susceptible we are to that tendency. But God never abandoned the exiles, and God never left us. Even after all this time, God's deepest longing is for us. A priest once told me that there's a name or title for God in the Eastern tradition that basically means, the lover who keeps knocking, asking us to let him in. It's an image we see, of all places, in the book of Revelation. "Listen!" God says. "I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you." It's an image that has stuck with me, God coming to us with such persistence and such vulnerability. But if I'm very honest, most of the time I'm too busy, self-absorbed, or preoccupied—ironically, often with the work of being a priest-- to open the door.

Last week, Fr. Tim challenged us to be co-laborers with Christ, working for peace and justice. That is the critical outward work, the good fruit that John the Baptist is talking about. The health of the tree, its capacity to bear that fruit, OUR capacity to be part of bringing forth justice, depends on the inward work, the repentance that John is calling us to. For all the fire and brimstone, the call to repentance is, at its heart, an invitation. Come back from the exile of your own making, and come home to God. Open the door and receive your Creator, whose deep longing is for you. God is already with us. But John asks of us, will we make the space to be with God?

In two and a half weeks, we will celebrate Christmas. We will celebrate God making a highway back home for us through Jesus. It is the work of an infinitely generous, loving, and faithful God who will never leave us to our unholy mess, but will keep knocking and keep making a way to us. But we don't have to wait until then. God is already here, waiting to be known. Amidst all of the other preparations, find some time to make a cup of tea and open the door. God is waiting.