

Advent III Year B

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives; to proclaim the year of God’s favor; to comfort all who mourn....to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

As y’all know I mostly preach on the gospel text assigned for the day, but today I want to do something a little different, something of a teaching sermon, recognizing that much if not most of the imagery found in the New Testament Literature including the gospels comes from the so-called Old Testament, from Hebrew scripture. The gospel writers in particular draw much if not most of the imagery concerning Jesus from the typology of Hebrew scripture...typology being recurring characters, archetypal representations of Holy men and women...and typological themes as well.... again themes that recur like liberation, hospitality, forgiveness, turning from God and then redemption....persons or personas, and thematic elements which provide overarching meaning to the biblical history of Israel, connecting the present theological reality with the ancient past...the gifted scribes following the golden thread of truth begun before time immemorial. Following the golden thread of what it means to be truly human in relationship with the creator of all things, the great lover of souls... In other words the New Testament writers don’t see a break from Old Testament tradition; quite the opposite: they see recurring patterns that give validity and authority to the inherited teachings found in the biblical history of a people, and therefore validity and authority to new teaching based on the inherited tradition....I hope this makes some sense....because if we are to interpret New Testament literature with integrity, and in particular to interpret the figure of Jesus for our own time, we need to know something of the context drawn upon by these later scribes, the first century New Testament crowd who are telling the story of Jesus as the story of Jesus pertains to the tradition, given a new *sitz im leben*...a new state of things... the way things are at the time....the context of the day....Our *sitz im leben* for example would be something like...The United States is arguably the most powerful nation on earth, having fought recently two of its longest wars in history, our economy fragile, maybe on the verge of recovery, maybe collapse; financial markets worldwide tentative as well, famines in developing countries, a great global disparity of wealth...instability and unrest in the middle east... deep trouble in parts of Africa...China on the rise as a world power...

climate change...that's our *sitz im leben*, our context, my take, of course. And the trick is to relate our context to these ancient texts and find the same golden thread...the precious knowledge of who we are as beloved of God on our way to a promising future in the balance.

So today we are going to look at Isaiah from whom we just heard, because Isaiah is arguably the most often quoted prophet in the gospels... and we have been hearing a lot from Isaiah lately, and will continue to hear from this prophetic book this year....There are other Old Testament citations to be sure in Christian literature...but the thematic and typological elements found in Isaiah carry more weight than any other source in Hebrew scripture.... particularly with regard to the person of Jesus and the message he brings.

So a brief tour here about the structure of the Book of Isaiah: First of all, Isaiah is not one single prophet, but many, a composite prophet, as it were. The writings under the name of Isaiah most scholars agree extend from the mid 8th century B.C.E. of Israel's history all the way to 500 B.C.E. and perhaps as late as the mid fifth century, some eighty years after the return of the people Israel from exile in Babylon...so that's biblical narrative covering 250 to 300 years in a world in which life expectancy is 25 years old, so a host of scribes would have had their hand in this work; it is quite the collaborative enterprise... Modern scholars have divided Isaiah into three parts, each pertaining to a particular period in Israel's biblical history... 1st Isaiah purports authorship by a certain Isaiah son of Amoz, hence the name, and it is concerned with the political situation in Jerusalem between 750 and 700 B.C.E....the northern kingdom of Israel has broken away from Judah and aligned with Assyria....Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel is ruled by Ahaz who has a treaty with Egypt to its south and west for non-aggression, so that Judah can use all its resources protecting its northern borders from Assyria....Ahaz is aging and frail...his yet to be born son who will be named Hezekiah will ascend to the throne....and now there is unrest in the realm...a new situation...new opportunities for the enemies of Judah: And Isaiah the prophet speaks (Isaiah 7): "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign...See, the virgin is with child and she shall bear a son and he shall be named Emmanuel... sound familiar?.....and then just following in ch. 9, this portion called the song of Hezekiah, ancient words probably set to meter and song by some scribe many years after this was first written, as it was again set to music just some four centuries ago: "For unto us a child is born, a son is given, and authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named wonderful counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, prince of peace...and he will establish the throne of David in peace and justice...for

the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.” Isaiah proclaiming to his people that there will be new hope, new possibility... And in Matthew’s gospel, just to make the typological point: Matthew writes concerning the birth narrative of Jesus, “All this took place to fulfill the prophecy that see a virgin shall bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel. Of course the name of the New Testament child is Jesus, but that is of no consequence to Matthew... he’s interested in the typology....a new birth anointed by God, a new hope, a new future, an ancient profound and recurring theme in the life of a people.

So as we read first Isaiah we see that the context is set in turbulent times in the History of Israel and Judah...as that history has forever been, and forever shall be...like life itself...First Isaiah’s theme is about protection and hope...and a promise of a sure and certain new way forward being led by the anointed of God...acknowledging God’s love for God’s people for an imminent deliverance....acknowledging God’s own concern for the well-being of God’s people.

Second Isaiah is written some 125 years later when much of the population of Judah had been deported to Babylon, the conqueror of Assyria, and held there in exile, and Jerusalem ransacked, looted and burned. A new context... Hear the words of Second Isaiah amid the darkness: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God...speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid...In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God...every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low.... the rough places made plain...then the glory of the lord shall be revealed.” Second Isaiah is about comfort in the dark night of the soul...and again the hope and promise of new life....a new way ahead...we immediately recognize this passage because it serves as the beginning of Mark’s gospel....typology of the golden thread...the truth that holds the human family together.

And then third Isaiah, the return of the exiles and the resettlement of Jerusalem under the aegis of Cyrus, king of Persia, conquerors of Babylon, whom Isaiah dubs messiah, the anointed of God to lead God’s people home... You know these words from third Isaiah “the spirit of God is upon me; he has sent me to bring good news to the captives, to the oppressed; to bind up the broken hearted to proclaim the year of God’s favor....to provide for those who mourn a garland instead of ashes...a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit...they shall build up the ancient ruins...they shall raise up the former devastations...rebuild the ruined cities”....and then the stern warning to keep the faith....so that the renewed Jerusalem will flourish once again.

Here we have some two hundred and fifty to three hundred years of witness as to the nature of God and God's relationship to God's people... over those years many sages and writers have loaned their art to this sacred book, setting some of it to poetry some of it to song, bearing witness to a God who is forever in the business of salvation, forever bearing hope and promise, signs of the golden thread ...Our God entering our world and freeing us from that which binds us. In my mind the fact that this book has had the imprimatur of a host of generations after tweaking here and there, applying the imagination of both hindsight and foresight....connecting artfully the golden thematic thread....a glorious work in progress as God's work is still in progress...all of this gives this sacred text, I think, profound authority....that is why I think the gospel writers give it so much weight, and therefore why the gospels bear such weight and authority.

Because, brothers and sisters, though over the centuries many things have changed, things have not changed...we still live in a turbulent world, a world at risk, a world broken and wounded...a world at the moment waiting in the dark...until, God willing, the days begin to lengthen...and the earth as well as our earthly existence will be renewed again....that is what we have waited for from generation to generation...our most precious possession is the holy hope that all manner of thing may be made well in our world, in our lives and in the lives of generations to come. Jesus is the archetype of such a legacy, a legacy of compassion and justice and hospitality and freedom that knits together the human enterprise as it forever has... If you feel you are in the dark, take heart, because generations of witnesses have witnessed a great light that comes surely. Freedom is forever at hand...Isaiah's promise, the promise of the gospels are forever in our midst...that there is hope in the dark; that God loves us as God's own...and that God that will never leave us comfortless....that the light of God will burst forth as surely as the green shoots of spring.... And we know it to be true. We have been reminded from generation to generation to hope for God's glorious coming...for the mouth of the Lord, borne by the voices of God's people... the mouth of the Lord, over time and space, the mouth of the lord has spoken it.