

The Second Sunday in Advent

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

The Second Sunday in Advent traditionally deals with the scripture as God's means of communicating good news to those who read or hear it. This lectionary stresses that announcement of good news to Israelite exiles living in Babylonian captivity, to those about to hear the good news of the life, ministry and redemptive actions of Jesus the Christ, and to early Christians awaiting the coming of the Lord. Our reflection will begin with the examination of today's selections from the Hebrew Bible.

Isaiah 40:1-11. "Comfort, O 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, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Isa. 40:1-2)

There are few passages of scripture as well known as these opening lines of the second part of Isaiah. That chapter is one of the most beautiful, poetic and deeply moving passages in scripture. But its very beauty and familiarity somehow seem to get in the way of our working with that passage, so that we easily miss its theological and spiritual depth.

Isaiah 40:1-11 is primarily a dialogue between God and the prophet that is part of the prophet's commissioning to be the messenger of Yahweh to the Israelites living in Babylonian exile. It begins with God speaking, not to the prophet, but to an angelic host (thus bearing marked similarities to Isaiah's view of the holiness of God in Isaiah 6 and to the angelic welcome of Jesus before stupefied shepherds as recorded in Luke 2:9-14). That the intended audience of God's instructions is an angelic host is seen in the fact that the words "comfort" and "speak" are plural in form (Hebrew *nakhamu* and *dabberu* respectively), and can only be spoken to a body of listeners and not to one person. So these instructions are not meant for the prophet, but for an angelic host.

God's instruction to them is "Comfort my people, speak tenderly to them that their term is ended, that they have received from the Lord's hand double for all their nation's sins." In several ways, the angelic host is to console the devastated Israelites living in Babylonian captivity.

First, comfort is to be spoken to "my people". Israel may have sinned both most grievously and over an extended time as a nation. They may have repeatedly rejected God's dream of what their society should be like, preferring dominating power, greed, accumulation of wealth, creation of a large body of the destitute, and turning a highly relational faith into liturgy and rote and ritual devoid of any compassion. They may have thoroughly rejected God as king over them (I Samuel 8:7). They may have had to have gone through being destroyed as a nation and their leaders taken into captivity because of their disobedience of God and their rejection of God's intentions for their society. But they were still "my people" They were still loved by God. And God would not disown them.

Second, the Israelites in Babylonian exile can be consoled because "(they) have served their term". They have completed the 70-year punishment that they had to endure in order to compensate for their refusal to redistribute the wealth of their nation on the sabbatical years (II

Chronicles 36:20-21). They have received “double” for their sins (Isa. 47:6-7; 52:13—53:12; 54:4-8; 62:4), God has judged the punishment to be sufficient and so he is ready to forgive them (Isa. 53:25; 44:22; 48:9) and thus to restore them once again back to Jerusalem.

A member of the angelic host now responds to God’s liberating announcement. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (40:3). The host reports to God that the “highway” he had ordered has been constructed between Babylon and Jerusalem. Now the exiles can travel it, as they return from their captivity to their treasured city of Jerusalem. As they walk down that “way made straight”, they will be taking a second exodus as a people from a second land of bondage back to their Promised Land. But on this second trip, God will smooth a way for them. “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain” (40:4). The exiles, being dragged to Babylon, stumbled and fell over the high mountains, the deep valleys, the dry desert on their way to a city they loathed. Now, those exiles are returning to the city that they love, but returning over a highway going through a country marvelously leveled by God. “Prepare” and “make straight” means “to remove all obstacles”. And God, through his angelic host, has magnificently made the way level.

But there is a reason why God removes all obstacles at His coming. He not only does that to make the way easy for his exiled people, but he also expects his people to prepare for his intended kingdom (62:10) “The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (40:5). God’s liberating work is not intended only for Israel, but for all nations. Those nations will see the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Babylonian bondage and their unanticipated return. So, those nations will join in the celebration, and will embrace Yahweh and his kingdom of shalom, his society of justice and economic equality built upon a relational culture. “All people shall see it (God’s kingdom) together”. God’s political, economic and spiritual intentions will be made clear not simply to returning Jewish exiles but to all the nations. That revelation of God’s Kingdom was made visible in creation, in God’s call to Israel, and now through Israel’s miraculous liberation from Babylon (and would be later demonstrated through Christ, in the church, and in a “new heaven and a new earth” – Gen. 9:17; Deut. 7:6-11; Matt. 2:1-11; 16:27; 24:30; Acts 28:28; II Cor. 3:18).

A member of the angelic host commands, “Cry out”. And for the first time, the prophet speaks. “What shall I cry (40:6)?” Once he has found his voice, the prophet then continues. “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass” (40:6b-7).

God wants the prophet to share this good news of Israel’s coming liberation with the Jews who are groaning under Babylonian captivity. But the prophet responds to God, “How can I share this news with my people, because this Babylonian exile has demonstrated infallibly to them how helpless and devastated and vulnerable and incompetent they really are. They are nothing but grass which is turned to dead straw when the hot winds of Yahweh (like their Babylonian exile) blow over them.”

Then comes the most powerful moment in this account. The angelic host speaks. “The grass (indeed) withers; the flower (certainly) fades – BUT THE WORD OF OUR GOD WILL STAND FOREVER!” The Word – the *dabar*, the *Logos* of God is eternal. That word that spoke the world into being, that word that proclaimed to the mightiest monarch of them all “Set my people free”, that word that proclaimed truth to Israel for the previous 700 years – that word now proclaims that the Israelite captives will be set free and will return to Jerusalem. And it will happen! The promises God makes are eternal, and they will not be made void! So declare that, Isaiah, to your people who seem like grass. That word can never be undone – because it is a saving word (John 1:1-18).

So, because God has given his word – “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, HERE IS YOUR GOD!” (40:9)

Return, exiles, to your battered, beaten City of God. Return in joy and triumph from your exile, and proclaim to them that God has returned, as well. God has returned in order to inaugurate his kingdom among them here on earth – his shalom community of justice, equity and dynamic relationship with himself (Isa. 35:4; 43:15; 44:6; 52:7-10). God has returned with his “might and (outstretched in warfare) arm” (vs. 10) in acts of deliverance and vengeance. But God has also returned as the comforter who will care for and nurture the flock of Israel (John 10:11-18). So it is that both by demanding justice and by compassionate comforting, God will shape a people into the society – the kingdom – he has called them and intended them to be.

Thus it is that, in this passage, the return from Babylonian exile is not so much envisioned as a release from bondage as it is the provision of a new opportunity to create upon the earth people, a nation and a worldwide humanity living in the way that God created and called us to live – the kingdom of God upon this earth! Will it happen? Read on.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, though short, has three distinct movements to it that encapsulate how God acts to revive God’s people, so that they become imitators of God in their effort to work for justice in the world. As such, this psalm was clearly intended to parallel Isaiah 40.

The first movement begins, “Lord, you were favorable to your land, and restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin” (vss. 1-2). It reminds the reader of the psalm (and God Himself) of God’s saving acts toward Israel in the past. It may refer to a specific act of divine pardon and blessing, most likely Israel’s release from Babylonian captivity and the freedom of the captives to return to Israel. As such, it is a reflection of Isaiah 40:1-11.

The second movement (vss. 4-7) introduces the lament. “Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us” (vs. 4). The poet weeps over the plight of Israel, and all that they have suffered through their captivity to Babylon. But then he moves to assure the Israelite community that God is about to act in a way that will liberate the Hebrews from their sad estate and restore them to God’s intentions for them. With such an assurance, the author moves to the final – and dominant – movement of this psalm.

“Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land” (vss. 8-9). God is about to act, and we will be both witnesses to that action and recipients of it so that we will be transformed ourselves!

How will God bring his glory to the nation and its people. God will bring his glory through so working among the people that they will be transformed and both their national policies and personal actions will restore Israel to the shalom to which they had formerly been called.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps” (vss. 10-13).

There are four specific words the psalmist uses to describe the covenant bond between Israel and God that will not only reflect God’s actions toward Israel but the people’s actions and the actions of their political, economic and religious systems toward each other and toward other nations. Those four words are steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace.

“**Steadfast love**” is the Hebrew word, *chesedh*. It is not translatable into English (that is, there is no English equivalent of this Hebrew word, although the word “grace” comes closest to it). *Chesedh* is used in two ways in the Old Testament. It either describes God’s redeeming, unconditional, totally embracing love toward us. Or it is used to describe our redeeming, unconditional, totally embracing love toward one another. It is that latter meaning that is used in Psalm 85:10.

“**Faithfulness**” expresses the Hebrew concept of “walking humbly” before God and each other (viz. Micah 6:8), the idea that the essence of authentic faith is relationship – a faithful relationship of compassion, commitment and deep caring for each other that permeates the entire way we relate to other people. Thus, people are not objects whom we use to accomplish our ends, but folk made in the image of God whom we cherish for whom they are, not for what they can do for us. Likewise, God is not an object we manipulate or seek his favor in order to get our desires met, but rather one with whom we need to be in a dynamic and loving relationship.

“**Righteousness**” is the Hebrew word, *tsedeq*. This word (and the concept lying behind it) is particularly hard for us English-speakers to understand because the word “righteous” has undergone such profound change. Today, the English word “righteous” means acting in accord with divine or moral law; free from guilt or sin, or morally right. Consequently, it describes private or moral behavior. *Tsedeq*, on the other hand, meant compensatory equality, public justice, clemency and compassion. It can be as easily translated “justice” as it can be “righteous”, but it is often used in tandem with the Hebrew word, *mishpat* (which is also translated justice). *Mishpat* meant the legal acting out of justice (as in a law-court), while *tsedeq* meant the ethical use of justice (as in compassionate mercy toward the poor and the victims of the misuse of power).

“Peace” is the fourth characteristic and the most important of the four terms used by the psalmist here. The Hebrew word translated “peace” is, of course, *shalom*. It is used in scripture to describe the entirety of a people, nation or culture living under God. *Shalom* is occurring when “right religion” is being practiced when a nation’s beliefs, values and practices bring people and their society into an active, dynamic love relationship with God. It is occurring when both the people in their everyday lives and the political institutions of that society are acting justly and mercifully, especially toward those who could become powerless. It is occurring when poverty is being systematically eliminated throughout the nation and by that nation’s intentional action and wealth is being shared.

In order for a nation or people to truly experience shalom, all three elements of society – its religion, its political order and its economic institutions must be centered on building a relational culture (“steadfast love” or *chesedh*), working for equitable justice for all (both *mishpat* and *tsedeq*), and economic equity (“faithfulness”)! That is what this psalmist is declaring that God will do for God’s people *through* God’s people! This psalm is a description of the shalom community, of what God can bring and would bring upon Israel if they would embrace shalom for the systems and the people of Israel.

Mark 1:1-8. The book now called the Gospel According to Mark begins with the words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). That is a very significant statement, for it is the first time that the word “gospel” is used in the Bible and, perhaps, in Christianity.

The word “gospel” is a familiar word to Christians today, one we would define as “the message concerning Christ, the kingdom of God and salvation”¹. But that was not its meaning when Mark first chose to use it.

What did the word “gospel” mean to people living in the Roman Empire at the time of the writing of the Gospel of Mark? And what, consequently, was the significance of Mark choosing this word to represent the message of Jesus?

The word “gospel” was a technical term for “news of victory” (as, for example, regarding the outcome of a war; if you were on the winning side, then the news to you that the war was won by your side was “gospel”). Its most precise usage was as the technical word for the ascension to power of a new ruler of a nation – in particular, for a new Roman emperor. This was what associated the use of the word with “good new”, for the “gospel” was the broadcast of the crowning of a new Roman emperor that, presumably, was “good news” to the Roman world.

What, then, was the significance of Mark choosing this word to describe the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth? It is stated in stark terms by Ched Myers, an outstanding commentator on Mark:

“Mark is serving notice that he is challenging the apparatus of imperial propagation. His dramatic prologue heralds the advent of an “anointed” leader, who is confirmed by the Deity and who proclaims a “kingdom”. In other words, Mark is taking dead aim at Caesar and his

¹ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1987, p. 528.

legitimizing myths. From the very first line, Mark's literary strategy is revealed as subversive. Gospel is not an inappropriate title for this story, for Mark will indeed narrate a battle. But the "good news" of Mark does not herald yet another victory by Rome's armies; it is a declaration of war upon the political culture of the empire."²

Mark then continues in that opening sentence, ". . . the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". The name, "Jesus Christ" is not simply the formal name of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a name and title – "Jesus *the* Christ", "Jesus" being the name and "Christ" being the title. The title "Christ" (or *Christos* in Greek) is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word *mashiakh* (or, in English, *messiah*). This, too, is a political title. The Messiah, in Hebrew tradition and theology, is as technical a word as is "gospel". The word actually means "the anointed one". Initially, it was used of the sitting king of Israel, because his ascension to the throne occurred as the result of his being "anointed" with oil by the highest prophet in the land (cf. I Sam. 10:6—16:13). Thus, it came to be used of all the kings of Judah. Intriguingly, it is once even used of a pagan king – Cyrus, the builder of the Persian Empire and the one who freed Israel from Babylonian captivity (Isa. 45:1). Once the Jewish monarchy no longer governed the land, the term *messiah* was increasingly used (especially during the intertestamental period) of a "once-and-future" king who God would bring to power to overthrow the current captors of Israel and to establish a kingdom in the Davidic tradition.³

The point is, however, that Mark's choice of the word "christos" (or "mashiakh) for the person named Jesus was a political term.

Finally, Mark calls Jesus "Son of God". This is a third technical term. We have filled it with theological content, so that it means the unique incarnation of Yahweh upon earth, fleshed as Jesus of Nazareth – "God of Very God". But that understanding took three centuries to formulate.⁴ In Mark's generation, the term "Son of God" was another technical term, a Hellenistic title used to describe a "divine man" or a person of special "divine" power, especially used for a ruler who was so wise in his judgment and decisions that his voice could be perceived only as that of a god and not of a man (Acts 12:20-23).

Thus, what is truly significant about the opening sentence of Mark is that Jesus is described as a king or emperor through Mark's careful usage of technical Latin, Hebrew and Greek terms that represent the highest and wisest rulership in the Roman, Jewish and Hellenist worlds! This announcement at the beginning of Mark is recaptured in his crucifixion, in which Mark specifically tells us that nailed to the cross above the dying Jesus was the inscription "The King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26) which John elaborates was written "in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek" (Jn. 19:20).

Thus, the Gospel of Mark begins by telling us that it is a political tract – the story of God's building of an alternative kingdom through the One sent from God – Jesus of Nazareth. This

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), pp. 123-124.

³ Alan Richardson, *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (NY: The Macmillan Co., 1960), pp. 44-46.

⁴ E.g., Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 105-119.

gospel (“good news”) is of that One whose involvement in public life seeks to re-form all other kingdoms (whether they be Roman, Hellenist or Jewish) into society as God intended it.

Mark’s prologue continues, “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight’” (1:2-3).

What is intriguing is that Isaiah didn’t write, “See I am sending my messenger ahead of you . . .”. That line is from Malachi, and is as follows: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed he is coming, says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:1).

What Mark has done in this quotation is that he has taken the first half of Malachi’s statement (“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me”) and then combines it with Isaiah 40:3 (“A voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”). In other words, Mark doesn’t use the entirety of Malachi’s statement that the Lord will come to the Temple in Jerusalem. Rather, he chooses Isaiah’s insight that Messiah and the Lord of the Messiah will be found in the wilderness! And that is exactly what he wants to say. Why would that be?

The wilderness, in Israelite theology, was the traditional place where God met with his people and/or with a “man of God” to help form and shape him into the one God had called him to be. Thus, for example, God met with Moses in the desert (Exodus 2:11—4:31), with Elijah (I Kings 19:1-18) and with Jesus (Mark 1:9-13, cf. Matt.4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13) – and they all return from their encounter with God both profoundly spiritually deepened and with greater clarity regarding their call and vision. It was in the desert that God molded those who would be “messiahs” to their people – and it is important to Mark that those reading his gospel note that fact!

But the wilderness is important in another sense, as well. The wilderness represents the “periphery”, the “margins”, the “edge of the world” to Jew and Gentile alike. To Jews, the hub of the world where everything of significance happened was Jerusalem. And the center of Jerusalem was the Temple. It was the Temple that was the symbol to all Jews, not only of the religious center of worldwide Judaism, but its political and economic center, as well. It was the abode of those who were the leaders of Israel and of the systems that both governed Israel and set the priorities of the Jewish presence in society.

One named John – a strange man, an ascetic man – appears preaching in the desert the words of Isaiah, “prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight” (1:3). And the crowds flock out of the center of the world to its periphery, from the hub of Jewish life to its margins. And there they repent of their way of life accepting the lordship of Jewish priest and Roman emperor. And there they await the coming of the One whom John proclaimed would come.

And then Jesus – the Jewish Messiah, the Hellenist Son of God, the Roman Gospel-bearer who takes the place of the Roman emperor – came out of the desert proclaiming, “The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (1:15)! Thus, good news – news that

was politically, economically, and spiritually liberating – was being proclaimed. And redemptive history had begun!

II Peter 3:8-15a. In this scripture, Peter reminds us “that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (vs. 8). He goes on to declare, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (vs. 9). Nevertheless, Peter reminds us, judgment will come upon the earth. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed (or “burned up”)” (vs. 10).

In the light of this ultimate end to all of life, Peter asks, “what sort of persons ought you to be” (vs. 11)? How should your lives count? He answers his own question by declaring, “strive to be found by him at peace (read: “shalom”), without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation” (vss. 14b-15a).

In other words, what Peter is teaching his readers is that they are to be about the task of working for the “shalom” society. God is unbelievably patient with us, he declares, postponing judgment in order to maximize the opportunity for all his chosen to repent. But judgment will eventually come! It can be postponed; it can be delayed. But it cannot be denied. It will come. And when it comes, may God find you busy about “your father’s business” (Luke 2:49).

You, too, are called to be patient with the world. But the way you live out patience and await Christ’s coming is to be busy working for shalom, working to build the kingdom of God. You are to be at work in the world, declaring, “Comfort, comfort my people”. You are to be at work in the world, proclaiming the coming of the new emperor of the world and working for his empire by seeking justice within the political system, the elimination of poverty and the equitable sharing of wealth in the economic system and the building of a truly relational culture in which all peoples are caring deeply about one another and in love with Yahweh. That is the great mission to which all of us who are called to embrace the “Gospel” of Jesus Christ, the Son of God are called! And that is the good news to Christians patiently awaiting the return of “King Jesus”!

(Cycle B Advent 2.doc)