

Here is Your God

Year A, Third Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 35:1-10

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 15, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul, and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

After last week's talk about the woolly, locust-munching prophet of the wilderness, I probably should keep talking about John this morning as well. But with all the time spent this week practicing for this afternoon's recital of Handel's Messiah (6:00 at the Methodist Church – plug) I have been pretty much bathed this week in Isaiah's poetry, written to prepare the People of God for their redemption from their Babylonian captivity.

The king of Babylon was really hot stuff. He was more than just the monarch of a great empire. In his culture, he was also the highest of priests. He was, in fact, considered himself a god. And the king was really one for grand entrances. When he and his retinue returned to the city, from delicate negotiations for tribute money, or from not-so-delicate enemy chopping, they came back in *high style*. So that the king's royal feet wouldn't touch the nasty old desert floor, a *road* was built. It began miles out in the desert, beyond the view of the city. It entered the city through an ornately decorated gate, and ended at the foot of an enormous temple where the king would offer sacrifice to a character named Marduke, the king of the gods. This wasn't any little two lane country road, either. This was a fully paved, double width boulevard. And it wouldn't do to have the king's entrance complicated by having to trudge up and down over hills and through valleys. No, miles out into the desert, the roadbed was made completely leveled. The valleys were filled in. And the hills were flattened. Crooked places in the road were made straight. And the rough places were made plain.

It was into this world of royal deity that the people of Judah were thrust – or rather, dragged in chains. The first group of captives may well have been part of one of the king's victory parades. For generations, they labored to keep alive their faith, in a culture openly hostile to it. In Hebrew, this morning's lesson from Isaiah is a poem. When the poet prophet needed to speak words of comfort to those captives, he didn't need to reach far to find the images he needed.

The People of God, the prophet says, *will* find their way home. But they will not go home through the wilderness. The Chosen of God will travel home on a royal road, a holy road, paved straight and level for the real King. In the mean time, until that day comes, until *their* day comes, the prophet says, get ready. Tell everyone, he says, "Be strong!" Tell everyone, he says, "Do not fear!" Tell everyone, the prophet cries, "*Here* is your God!"

As we approach our annual celebration of the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, we too have entered our *own* period of preparation. We hustle around, busily doing all the things we have to do to get ready for Christmas, too easily forgetting that Advent is *more* than a waiting time before the real party. Advent is meant to be a time of genuine *preparation*, a time for reflection on the way that *God* has come among us, to point us to the babe of Christmas, and declare, "Here is your God!"

Of course, Advent has *another* meaning as well. Advent is *also* meant to point us *forward*, to the day when the white-robed King of Glory descends from heaven, to the blast of trumpets, and surrounded by innumerable angels. When that day comes, I doubt if any of us will have a hard time heeding the admonition of the poet to cry, "Here is your God!"

But what to do in the mean time? What do we do between the first Advent and the last? What are we to do about that command to prepare the way right here, right now?

Nowadays, we don't have kings that dress up and claim worship at lofty temples. But we sure have our share of demanding little gods, don't we? We live in a world, at a time and in a place in history, where people are finding all *sorts* of things to grab hold of as gods. We move in a culture where the latest and greatest is beamed into our living rooms, and onto our tablets and smartphones, and straight through our consciousness, twenty-four hours a day. If Jesus appeared today, walked across the Ohio, and leaped in a single bound to the top of the courthouse, I think most people would only wonder where he got those *shoes*.

But our materialism, our seeming love of... stuff, and more of it, is not, I believe, so much the *cause* of our problem today, as it is a *symptom* of it. The fact that so many in our world grab so tightly at every nickel plated, flower scented, name brand little god they can get their hands on, is only a sign, I believe, of how little of anything *better* they have in their lives. We work and we play, we sleep and we eat, in a world that is *crying out* for *something* to believe in, *something* to hold fast to, *something* that can finally and really sustain them. They want, they *need* a god in which to *believe*.

And here we are with the genuine article. Here we are with the One who brought his people out of Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. Here we are with the One who marched them home again from the darkness of their captivity. Here we are with the One who came as that little baby so long ago. Here we are with the One who loved us so much, that he lived as one of us. Here we are with the One who loved us so much, that he died as one of us. Here we are with the One who loves us, and loves us, and loves us *so* much, that he gave up *everything* to prove it. Here we are – when we should be out shouting from the top of a mountain. Here we are – when we should be raising up our voices in proclamation of the Good News. Here we are – when we as the Church of Jesus Christ have the mission, the obligation, the *command* to proclaim, “*Here* is your God!”

We talk about promoting church growth. And I'm with you. I'd love to see this place full. We talk about reaching out to the community. And I'm with you. I'd love to see us packing a *hundred* boxes for the River ministry and taking up *twice* a month collections for CCO. We talk about preparing our children, our youth and ourselves for Christian discipleship. And I'm with you. You pick the subject and I'll do the research. Anytime, anywhere. And all these things matter, and matter deeply. But it all rolls right back to that singular proclamation: “Here is your God!”

To world hungry in spirit as well as in body we must proclaim, “Here is your God, to feed you.” To a hurting world we must proclaim, “Here is your God, to heal you.” To a world grabbing for life and certainty, yet dying in despair, we must proclaim, “Here is your God, to gather you up in loving arms.” Here he is in all his might and glory. And here he is in all his tenderness and mercy. He's here in the baby in the manger. He's here in the blood of the cross. He's here in his body, the Church. He's here *each time* we gather to hear his Word, each time we gather to eat the bread and drink the wine that *are* his Body and Blood.

We must take up the strength to *shout* it to our neighbors. Collectively *and individually*, we must pluck up the courage to raise our voice to our community, and to the world. We may even need to whisper a reminder to each other, of the reality, the substance, of the prophet's cry, “*Here* is your God.”

“Be strong!” the poet sang. “Do not fear!” the prophet cried. “*Here* is your God!”