

5th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A: 6 February 2011

The passage from Isaiah that serves as our first lesson has long been one of my favorites. Not simply for its message—to which I will get in a moment—but as much for the sheer drama of the piece. It is masterfully written and truly demands nothing less than as Shakespearean a delivery as the speaker can muster!

We call thus author “3rd Isaiah,” because he is the last of three distinct voices all gathered together into the single book of prophecy we simply call “Isaiah.” In his writings he is speaking to those people of Jerusalem who were carried off into captivity by their Babylonian conquerors and who have now—under the revised policies of a new ruler—been allowed to return home, to rebuild their lives and to rebuild the temple, the dwelling place of God and the seat of all religious ritual.

We can only imagine what this must have been like: a joyous opportunity for reunion with those left behind, the reestablishment of economic livelihood, the reconstruction of a way of life broken by exile in a foreign land. And on top of this, oh, the delight of once again drawing near to God’s holy dwelling, or worshipping again in the temple and completing the required religious duties.

Yet the prophet rebukes the people. He is commanded by God to call them to account for their sins, and not quietly either: “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” It certainly takes the people by surprise; if the prophet wanted their attention he certainly gets it. Indeed, the people seem to believe they are doing all the right things and that it is God who has not been keeping faith. They are genuinely confused. Has God changed the rules while they were away? How could God not be pleased?

There are, no doubt, many issues that could be raised here, but like a good orator the prophet—speaking for God, remember, not just on God’s behalf but as God’s living voice—the prophet focuses on one thing. The people have complained: “Why do we fast but you do not see? Why humble ourselves but you do not notice?”

“Oh, I have noticed,” says the Lord. “And what I see is that you’re doing it all wrong. Forget what you think you know about fasting and the ritual actions you substitute for true religion. From now on, here’s what I’m looking for....” And then we get a classic prophetic calling of society to account. But please, please, notice the emphasis. Sometimes it’s easy to hear this or similar lists and our ears half-way shut and our minds gloss over—but my friends, the prophet, God, is talking to us. Not just to a group of Jewish emigrants in the 6th Century BCE but us.

And here is what God says:

“I want so much more from you.
I am not interested in one time actions, or even singular repeated pious acts.
I want you to reframe, to refocus, to reorder your lives.
I desire relationship with you and between you and all creation. And that means taking part in a whole-cloth dismantling of unjust relationships.

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When I say “fast,” I don’t mean stay away from meat on Fridays or candy during Lent. I want you to live lives that are aware that behaviors have broad social consequences, When I say “fast,” I mean leave behind all destructive behaviors—for good:

Stop domination.

Stop blaming others.

Stop evil speech.

Stop self-satisfaction.

And especially stop entitlement and blindness to your own privilege.

I want you to be vigilant for justice and generosity day in and day out, and when you see something that needs restructuring to make it right I want you to act on it. Nothing less than global transformation. That’s what I mean by fasting.”

And then God continues, “If you do what I ask, if you live as I want you to live, then you will be richly blessed. You cannot, individually or as a community, have a full relationship with me without a just relationship with one another. One’s piety is not, cannot be, disconnected from the rest of everyday life.”

Now, if you’re at all like me, these sort of conditional “if-then” statements—portrayed as coming from the mouth of God—make you uneasy. Imagine, however, if the prophet said to the people, “There’s really nothing you can do toward your healing, wholeness, and the companionship of God. They just happen or they don’t, and it doesn’t matter what you do.” Such a dismissal of their agency as God’s covenant people would leave them more helpless and less accountable, and the world in an undoubtedly darker place.

That’s certainly not the message we get from Paul, who reminds us that we have the mind of Christ, that through the revelation of the Holy Spirit we can know and can claim the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we can act on them and with them.

And this is certainly not the message of Jesus either, if we are to trust the words of the author of Matthew:

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Use these gifts, that others may see the glory of God at work in the world in you and give thanks.

The language of Isaiah, echoed in their own ways by Paul and Jesus, help to include the people—to include us—as active moral agents in our relationship with God. The consequences of our moral choices affect this God. God is not a lone ranger, acting in isolation. No. Our God expects a partnership with a restored and restorative people. The people are participants in God’s life, agents in God’s desires for God’s creation.

It would surely have been easy to believe that simply returning from exile to reside in Jerusalem, the holy city, made the citizens holy. It was equally tempting—and, I can fully understand—to believe that performing holy acts, like fasting and prayer, make one holy. But God’s challenges shake all these comfortable religious assumptions.

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And don't for a moment forget that these words are spoken as much to us as to our long ago ancestors in the faith. We, too, are prone to think that proximity to holy things—church, Bible, sacraments, priest, Prayer Book Order—that these will by themselves make us holy. My dear friends, this is, of course, idolatry. The only proximity that matters is our faithfulness to God which, Isaiah points out, is manifest in our faithfulness to the way of life God has provided. Therein lays our partnership and any hope of righteousness.

Throughout Advent, Christmas, and now Epiphany images of darkness and light have been central. God's in-breaking is marked by light; where there is light, we say, there is God. This week's reading uses this absolute contrast of darkness and light to describe what happens when a people—2500 years ago or today—allow God to break into their lives and change them.

I hope, now that you as CEC have entered the discovery phase of your search process, that you will think and pray long and hard about these themes of light in the darkness and who God is calling you to be as this community of faith in Red Wing. For believe it or not, you too are on a journey; not everything here is settled for life, nor is everything here is yet pleasing to the Lord.

In verse 3 of today's passage, the people accuse God of not seeing their piety, while they are the ones in the darkness of gloom, unable to see the real work, the real religion, to which God calls them. However, once the people partner with God's way of life, "Your light will break forth" (verse 8), and "then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday" (verse 10).

Apart from this theme of light, you have heard a lot from me about incarnation and God-with-us these last few months. There's a reason for that: first, because I believe it from the depth of my soul. Second, our lectionary passages during this season will continue to tell us a great deal about this God who has been revealed in in relationship with creation. Today's "Here I am" (verse 9) is declaration of the very presence of God among the people, as we participate in God's purposes. And this "Here I am" of God's stands in tandem with that earlier passage from Isaiah "Here I am, Lord. Send me" (6:8). It confirms the role we have as partners with God in God's on-going, never-finished, creative and redeeming work.

Isaiah, Paul, Jesus all remind us that we belong to a God who a) wants more than a formal, arms-length relationship with us; b) expects us to be active partners in bringing forth God's purposes; and c) is responsive to our choices. This is, to me, the good news: that God calls us, again and again, to share in the fullness of God's own life. As our closing hymn at 10:00 will put it: "God's all surrounding love will be both home and way our whole life long."

For that love and for the high purpose to which it calls us, let us give thanks and praise.

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