

Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 4: 13-14; Isaiah 55: 1-11

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit — Amen

“With this third week of Advent, we make a welcomed shift. After Daniel’s fiery flames and Ezekiel’s dry bones, we are now invited by Isaiah to “come to the water.” It’s a wonderful promise of abundance, leading us to ask, ‘So when does this overflowing hope arrive?’ But “you see, this passage - and Advent as well - is dead set on getting us to rethink the question we ask about God’s presence. In the face of our usual question, “When will God arrive?” Isaiah asks, “When will you notice that God is already here?”

“This reminder is especially important [or] we risk completely misunderstanding the nativity story when we come to it next week. Jesus’s birth is not a story of God suddenly bursting onto the scene. It’s not about an absent God that decides to finally be present. Instead, it’s about God making God’s on-going presence known in a new way.” To get ready for next week’s great celebration we “lean into Isaiah’s invitation to give ourselves the gift of noticing...God is here right now.”¹

During Advent, our readings had us keeping company with our Hebrew brothers and sisters living in exile in Babylon. We’ve thought about the ways we too can feel exiled from life as we knew it, life as we expected it or life as we had always dreamt of it. We have identified with times we have felt in a fiery furnace or like dried up bones. Each time, the prophets told the Hebrews and us to look up from despair.... look beyond hopelessness and the impossible to our God who is

faithful, life giving, committed to loving us and ready to give us the peace, mercy and hope we try to find in everything and everyone but God.

“At the time that this poem of Isaiah was written, the elite of Judah had been in exile for a little more than two generations. The targets of this oracle were the grandchildren of those who had been forcibly exiled when Jerusalem had fallen in 586 B.C.E. They had kept their identity as Jews telling stories to their children and grandchildren of the glory that had been Jerusalem.”² God had always promised that exile would come to end and they would return to their homeland and Jerusalem. Now God’s word was being fulfilled. “By 538 B.C.E.... Babylon had been conquered by the Persians. The Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the peoples whom the Babylonians had exiled to return to their homelands. In some cases, he even funded their return.³ You might think the Hebrew exiles would be dancing in the streets. Instead, there was hesitation and resistance.

“Lurking behind this text is the reality that many Jews living in Babylon at the time did not [particularly want] to return to Jerusalem. Recent archaeological finds provide evidence that by 538, the Jewish community had been integrated into Babylonian society. They had jobs, owned homes, and even lent money to others. Under the Babylonians and Persians, they were free to worship Yahweh, and suffered no coercion to recognize Babylonian gods. Furthermore, the cities within Mesopotamia were the financial, commercial, and cultural centers of that part of the ancient world.”⁴ Living in Babylon for almost 50 years, many of the current generation of Jews had never personally known Jerusalem and the Temple in its heyday. Why go to a city that is now in rubble? Why deal with its current inhabitants and the mammoth task of rebuilding the Temple, homes, city walls that would still be under Persia’s control? Babylon was looking just fine. Had “Jewish” become

merely an ethnic designation rather than a practicing, living faith with divine purpose?

Isaiah's task was to speak to the Hebrew people who had become so settled and comfortable in someone else's culture that they had forgotten who they were and whose they were. They had "forgotten their purpose, which was 'being servants' and being 'faithful' to God"⁵ so that they could be the light to the nations, serving in God's work to save, redeem and restore all creation. Instead they were consumed with seeking what could not satisfy — material comforts, social position, financial power — at the expense of their faith and mission, their relationship with God, their covenant with God, "You shall be our God and we shall be your people." It's a dangerous pathway to follow our human desire for power, control and material excess rather than God's way. Look at how our own buying frenzy... our own addictions to television, internet, cell phones, technology... our own tendencies to jam-pack our schedules. It can often leave us empty and disconnected from the Lord and God's church community. Have we gotten too comfortable in the ways of the world rather than God's ways? Isaiah is speaking to us. Come. Listen. Seek the Lord.

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

This longing of God to give us the gifts of joy and peace that passes all understanding is not new. It is at the heart of why God first created the world and humanity — to share the love of God - Father-Son-Holy Spirit. God's steadfast

faithfulness to us and the Lord's determination to heal, forgive, invite and pursue us in love did not just suddenly begin in Bethlehem. We see it throughout all of Hebrew Scripture, God's long history with our Hebrew ancestors and in our own lives. Or... don't we see it? It is so easy to miss the grace and hope of God right in front of us because it isn't what we expect or what we preferred. Like water that can be vapor, mist, rain, hail or snow, the grace and mercy of God takes on many forms. When will the hope and love of God arrive? Forever and ever — not always in the ways and timing we expect or want, but it's there.

When we ourselves get too comfortable in our 21st century Babylon, we forget we are citizens of God's kingdom — we're to be "in" but not "of" the world. When we get too comfortable in Babylon, we are never satisfied; we never have enough because we aren't drinking of the living water of God's Word, Meal and community. God's Word, that became flesh, still pours down on us in the Spirit. It's takes many forms — like a baby in a Bethlehem manger, a kindness, a hug, in beauty, generosity or laughter — and it is always near. The question is not, "When is God going to show up?" but "When are we going to notice God is already here?" Listen. Look. Believe. "The word that goes from my mouth," says the Lord, "does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do." (*Isaiah 55: 11b Jerusalem Bible translation*) God IS with us. Emmanuel. God IS with YOU. Notice. Give Thanks. And, like Isaiah, Tell others that they, too, can experience the truth — God IS here. God IS with us. Keep Watch. Stand on tiptoes. Stay awake to Emmanuel — God with us Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 12/15/17

ENDNOTES

-
1. Adapted from Scott Talyer, "The Water is Right Here. Why Are You Looking Over There?" as posted on [/Storylines%20Bible%20Study_Advent_Week%20Three%20\(1\).pdf](#)
 2. Adapted from Corrine Carvalho, "Commentary on Isaiah 55: 1-11, December 15, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 3. Adapted from Corrine Carvalho, "Commentary on Isaiah 55: 1-11, December 15, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 4. Adapted from Corrine Carvalho, "Commentary on Isaiah 55: 1-11, December 15, 2013 as posted on www.workingpreacher.org
 5. Dr. Keith Wagner "God's Way or Our Way?" copyright 2007 as posted on <https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/isaiah-551-9-gods-way-or-our-way-wagner>