

Promise and Disconnect; Hope in Hopelessness. Dale Ramerman  
Advent 3; Yr A Isaiah 35:1-10; Song of Mary; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Our readings for today are some of the most inspiring in scripture. Advent is a time of great hope and anticipation. But Advent is not a hope arising from blindness, not like a view from a tunnel lined with colorful posters that shuts out world. Advent is hope arising from what God has done and is doing in our world, and has promised for our future. And yet, we feel a disconnect between the promises and reality in which we live.

We read together a few minutes ago, as we do in almost every time we pray Morning or Evening Prayer, the Song of Mary, a prayer of hope and expectation. But we must also be honest. We live in a world in which many of the mighty are raised up, not cast down, and the lowly trampled upon. There is a tension between the wonderful vision of Mary's prayer and the world in which we live. We are challenged by our readings to ask ourselves whether we can have real hope while at the same time acknowledging our fears and disappointments.

Our reading from Isaiah 35, while found in the first section of Isaiah which was written prior to the Exile, is widely believed to have been written during the exile. It is a promise to those in exile that God will redeem God's people and bring them once again to Mount Zion. It may be difficult for us to grasp how discouraged the Children of Israel must have been after 70 years of Assyrian and then Babylonian captivity. Their history told them they had been freed from bondage in Egypt by a mighty act of God and had been established in their promised land. Yet here they were, in bondage again, far from their land, facing the same tension between their hope and their reality.

Psalm 137 reflects the anguish of this captivity:

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, \*  
when we remembered you, O Zion.  
As for our harps, we hung them up  
on the trees in the midst of that land.  
For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,  
and our oppressors called for mirth:  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."  
How shall we sing the LORD'S song  
upon an alien soil?

The prophet tells them the wilderness, through which they must travel to return to Zion, will be a fruitful land blooming with flowers and with springs of water, a land with a pathway so easy to follow that not even a fool will get lost, a land without threatening beasts, and that reflects the beauty of Mt Carmel and the plains of Sharon. The elderly and the lame will be restored, the eyesight of the blind and the hearing of the deaf returned. Those ransomed by the Lord shall return to Zion singing, filled with everlasting joy. And yetm their reality was so different.

And the fact is, the Children of Israel, the exiled remnant of the Southern kingdom of Judah, did return to Zion and reestablished their nation.

The Church has always read this Isaiah passage in Advent. In addition to addressing a return from Exile, this passage has been understood by the Church as foretelling the beginning of

the Kingdom of God that will occur with the birth of the Messiah.

Our Gospel reading reflects the same tension of being caught between promise and the surrounding circumstances. John, who sometime earlier had baptized Jesus, is imprisoned but has heard what Jesus is doing: calling disciples, teaching, healing the sick, calming the seas. So John sent one of his disciples to ask Jesus,

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Isn't that the question of anyone who thinks seriously about Jesus? Are you, Jesus, worthy of our commitment, discipleship, our ultimate allegiance? That may be our Advent question when we see the promise of God's rule yet unfulfilled: are you the one or should we wait for another?

Jesus' answer to John's disciple was not to tell John what Jesus was saying or what others were saying about him, but rather, to tell John what the disciple had seen: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

And then Jesus asks about those who went to see John in the wilderness, whether they went to see a reed shaken by the wind, someone dressed in fine robes, a prophet? And he answers, his own question: no one is greater than John, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is, a reversal that reminds us of the Song of Mary.

Our Isaiah reading, Jesus' response to John, and the season of Advent, all point back to God's mighty deeds of the past, to promises not yet fully realized, and to a coming time of fuller, future joy.

Isaiah's hope ends with the words, “sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” How can our sighing disappear? We sigh with weariness and regret, we sigh for beauty we cannot reach and for understanding beyond our grasp, for union and love, and for that we cannot even name. And God surely sighs as well. Individually, as a community of faith, and as a part of the people of God, we fall short so often.

But the hope of Isaiah, and our hope, is that it will not always be so. The Lord will come and save; the ransomed will come home singing; we shall experience, now and in future, the full promises of Advent.

Our hope, which we will pray for when we join in the Lord's Prayer, the hope Jesus talked more about than any other, is the coming Kingdom of God, a kingdom on earth in which all will be made right, a kingdom has already come and is yet to come.

I hear in Jesus' answer to John, God's answer for us when doubts plague us: Look and see God's work in the world: in our own community of faith, in the world around us, and in the broader world. All is not yet right, but we already see much to be thankful for. Christ's return and the full completion of God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven. And it is our task to work to ready the world for God's kingdom by feeding the hungry, lifting up the downtrodden, welcoming the stranger. In doing this work, Jesus will be known through us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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