

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 35:1-10

^{35:1} The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Commentary

Background: *This book can be divided into two (and possibly three) parts. Chapters 1 to 39 were written before the exile, from about 740 BC to about 700 BC. These were difficult times for the southern kingdom, Judah: a disastrous war was fought with Syria; the Assyrians conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, in 723 BC, and threatened Judah. Isaiah saw the cause of these events as social injustice, which he condemned, and against which he fought valiantly.*

In this beautiful oracle of restoration, the prophet promises:

- restoration of the land to fertility,
- the end of human suffering and infirmity,
- restoration of hope and justice, and
- the joyful return of the exiles from captivity.

The prophet has predicted the destruction of the nations, particularly of Edom (located south of Judea and the Dead Sea), and the devastation of their lands. The other lands will be laid waste,

rendered unproductive and given over to wild beasts (in Chapter 34). Now, in contrast, exiled Israel will be restored. The “desert shall ... blossom” (v. 1), the fertility of “Lebanon” (v. 2), “Carmel and Sharon”, which has been taken from them (33:9) will be given to Israel as a sign of God’s favor and glory. (The Plain of Sharon, extending from the Mediterranean coast to the Carmel range of mountains, was then covered with dense oak forest, as was much of Lebanon.) The land which had once been given over to wild beasts, such as jackals and lions, will once again be cultivated, and barren land will bloom.

Not only the land will be restored, but human life will also be transformed, with the end of infirmity (“make firm ... feeble knees”, v. 3, “blind”, “deaf”, “lame”, “speechless” vv. 4-6), and with the restoration of justice and hope. “Waters” (v. 6) and “streams” will make the land fertile again. Finally, the exiles, those taken captive to Babylon, will return on a “Holy Way” (v. 8), a “highway” in safety (v. 9) to “Zion” (v. 10), the holy city, and once again will worship God in the Temple. All of these will be signs that God’s rule is restored and that his favor rests on his people.

Reflection

Our Old Testament reading for this third week in Advent offers a picture of humanity – and all of Creation – restored and redeemed. This elusive vision is part of the promise of Advent. If this picture hasn’t come to pass fully yet – and it certainly has not, as our daily news relentlessly informs us – how do you see signs and suggestions of God’s restoration afoot, even now? What gives you hope for our world?

James 5:7-10

^{5:7} Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

⁹ Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Commentary

Background: *Although James opens like a letter, it is more of an exhortation to ethical conduct. Christians find themselves in an alien world, full of immorality and evil; they are called to a faith that is not merely theoretical or abstract, but practical and acted upon, in every aspect of their lives. The recipients appear to be a group of Jewish-Christian communities outside Palestine. Traditionally, the Church has seen the author of this book as James, the brother of our Lord; however, scholars believe that its date, style, and concerns suggest that the author was not James but someone writing in his name, thus giving the book authority.*

Early Christians expected the return of Jesus, the *second coming*, almost immediately. This related to expectations about the Kingdom of God. The apparent delay of this event caused some difficulties and even some disputes among the faithful. James warns his readers not to be impatient (vv. 8-9), lest this impatience lead to grumbling and division within the church (v. 9), which will bring judgment. For with the second coming of Christ comes also the judgment of

God. The second coming is a *two-edged sword*: its arrival is both a comfort and a warning to Christians!

Instead, James tells his readers that they are to be patient in suffering like the prophets (v. 10). They are to bide their time like the farmer who plants his crop in the knowledge that the rains will come in their own time (v. 7). (In Palestine, there are two rainy times of the year: October--November, "early" and April--May, "late".) So it is with the Kingdom. It is on its way, it is "near", (v. 8) but will come in its own time. Our impatience will not hasten its coming, but we can expect it with the confidence of faith.

Reflection

As a society, we are anything but patient: we want the fastest internet connections, we chafe at lines supermarket checkout lines and we love our drive-through coffee, banking, and "fast food." In this season of waiting and expectancy, how might God be asking you to slow down, to be patient, and to "strengthen your hearts"?

Matthew 11:2-11

^{11:2} When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." ⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Commentary

Background: *This gospel is the first in the New Testament, but it was probably the second to be written. Scholars recognize that it borrows material from Mark, and from a "sayings source" containing sayings of Jesus. The author shows an understanding of Jewish culture and religion not found in the other gospels. It was probably written about 60 to 70 AD, possibly for a largely Jewish audience.*

John the Baptist has been arrested and imprisoned. Discouraged and in doubt, he sends messengers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one ...?" (v. 3) But Jesus does not simply say yes. Instead, he points John (and the crowd) to the signs of the Kingdom (v. 5). Echoing Isaiah, he points out that the blind, the deaf, the lame and the lepers are being healed and good news is given to the poor. Anyone can claim to be a herald of the kingdom, but only in the presence of the Messiah will the true signs of the Kingdom be evident. These are not mere claims, but incontrovertible proof. Yet apparently there are some who take offense at Jesus (v. 6). Perhaps even John himself has been disappointed because his expectations of the Messiah do not seem to be

fulfilled by Jesus, e.g. he does not “wear soft robes” (v. 8). Perhaps this has given rise to doubts. Jesus refers to the signs of the Kingdom in Isaiah. John is “more than a prophet” (v. 9) for he heralds the dawn of the final era of history and announces the coming of the Kingdom. Now Jesus validates John’s ministry as a true prophet (by quoting a prophecy from Malachi, v. 10), going on even to identify John as Elijah, returned (v. 14). (Jews understood the time of the prophets to have ended, but took Malachi’s words to mean that Elijah would come again.) Jesus criticizes the people who went out to see John the Baptist in the wilderness with a variety of incorrect expectations. What they saw was greater than they could have imagined. Yet even John, as great as he was, only pointed the way to an even greater reality (v. 11). The time of prophetic promise led up to and included John the Baptist; now this promise is starting to be fulfilled (v. 13). When we are disappointed, or our expectations of God’s Kingdom are dashed, perhaps it is because we are not looking for the signs of the Kingdom that are all around us.

Reflection

Even John the Baptist, the last of the biblical prophets and the forerunner of Christ, could have his doubts about the Messiah. Is this really the Son of God? John asked about Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Do you think God condemns our doubts, or does God honor them as a natural component of faith?

Responsive Psalter

Luke 1:46b-55 (UMH 199)

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
who has looked with favor on me, a lowly servant.

From this day all generations shall call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is the name of the Lord,
whose mercy is on those who fear God
from generation to generation.

The arm of the Lord is strong,
and has scattered the proud in their conceit.
God has cast down the mighty from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich empty away.
God has come to the aid of Israel, the chosen servant,
remembering the promise of mercy,
the promise made to our forebears,
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.