

ADVENT 3 - DECEMBER 11 (Isaiah 42:1-9) - The Suffering Servant

The book of Isaiah was composed during and following the Babylonian captivity. There are three separate collections of oracles: *Proto-Isaiah* which covers the first 39 chapters of Isaiah ben Amoz; *Deutero-Isaiah* - the middle chapters which contain the work of an anonymous 6th-century author writing during the Exile; and *Trito-Isaiah* - the last ten chapters, composed after the return from exile. Prophetic literature can be described as “meaning-making literature for communities under siege.” A prophet like Deutero-Isaiah who speaks to the exiles who are still recovering from the trauma of the Babylonian invasion indeed can be characterized as a “map of hope for disoriented and dislocated people at risk of losing their bearings.”

Like Esther we read about last week, and Habbakuk the week before, Deutero-Isaiah can also be considered someone who was sent “for a time such as this.” Today’s passage from Deutero-Isaiah shows God speaking into the pain of exile, promising to send a servant who will bring justice, not only to Israel, but to all nations. Dramatic and powerful! We’ve entered into the middle of the story of God’s people.

God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt, made a covenant with them and brought them through wilderness into the land of Canaan. They became a nation and built a temple for their God. For centuries they saw military victories and defeats under kings and generals. They strayed from God’s covenant but prophets called them back, over and over again. Then, in the sixth century BCE, the unthinkable happened.

As we heard last week, the Babylonians defeated Israel. They destroyed the temple, plundered Israel's treasure and livelihoods, took them into bondage, and marched them back to the gates of Babylon in chains, prompting the psalm (and also one of our hymns of lament): *"By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion."* The Babylonian victory over Israel was absolute. It was utter, complete devastation of the political, social, economic and religious life God's people had known for centuries.

For most of us who have not experienced combat and defeat on our own soil, it may be difficult to imagine just how devastating it was for God's chosen people to be handed over to their enemies, humiliated, destroyed, and taken into bondage – and all while God did not intervene to prevent with God's divine hand, the terrible defeat.

We should not underestimate the agony of this situation. Nor should we downplay the effect of living among people of different languages, cultures, and religions. Babylon was a cosmopolitan city and the exiles, while enjoying a level of freedom were nevertheless refugees in a strange society. They were demoralised. Their world had collapsed around them, including their 'faith world.' Israel was abandoned to its enemies. How could the Mighty Deliverer allow this to happen. Had God abandoned them? Removed from access to the temple and to the land, were they still God's people? Was God still God? In exile they could only conclude that God had withdrawn favour and allowed the Babylonians to punish them for their sins and disobedience.

On the other hand, those who sought to remain faithful to the old ways, and to the God whom their ancestors had worshipped, found themselves having to rethink some old views. New theological insights were needed. Today's reading involves two of these: the idea of God's 'servant' and of God's relation to the whole of creation.

Into this identity crisis Isaiah speaks. The prophet reminds the people who God is and how God works. He draws their attention from this particular, historical moment to the larger purposes of God. As Isaiah speaks, it's as though we see the camera lens zooming slowly out from a close up shot to a wide-angle view, a cosmic view. By reminding Israel of how God works, and what God is doing by sending a servant, Isaiah expands the frame of reference, re-locating and purposing Israel's particularity within God's cosmic frame.

God is the God, not only of Israel or even of Babylon, but the one who "created the heavens and stretched out the earth." This is the God of creation, who made everything that is, and who dwells in the wide, open cosmic space, not contained by the cramped space of exile. This is the God "who gives breath to the people upon the earth and spirit to those who walk on it." God's breath animates not only the people of Israel, but every living, breathing creature on the planet. And finally – this is also the God who has reached out to create the particular people called Israel, to call them to righteousness, and keep them. This is the God of the expansive universe, **and** the God of these very particular people.

Isaiah proclaims this God acts in particular ways. First, God sends a spirit-filled servant, not a conqueror or tyrant: “He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle.” This agent of God is a liberator who will bring justice, not domination. Second, God works to bring justice to all, everywhere: “He will bring justice to all who have been wronged. He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth. Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction.” God sends this servant to persevere until justice is done all the way to “the distant lands beyond the seas.”

Third, God purposes God’s people to be “a light to the nations, and to free the captives from prison, releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.” God calls them to righteousness not for themselves alone, but for the nations. Isaiah reminds this exiled people that God has not abandoned them but is indeed at work among them, restoring them to be a blessing.

This is good news! God is still God. God’s people are still God’s people in their particularity, yet with a purpose that extends beyond themselves to all the earth. Yet, the reassurance Isaiah offers is not triumphalistic. There is no talk of revenge, of turning tables on the Babylonians, no “let’s kick butt and take names.”

Rather, Isaiah shifts Israel’s gaze from themselves back to the wide casting of God’s promise and plan. The horizon of possibility is no longer the hand in front of my face, but the very edge of the earth’s curvature. A roomy expanse for God to “declare new things” that “spring forth.” This is a vision

full of future.

The pattern of servanthood continues from Isaiah to Matthew as we heard in our short Gospel reading. In Jesus, God again sends a servant who will bring justice, whom God anoints to bring good news to the poor “proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and declare the years of the Lord’s favour.”

Prophetic literature has been described as “meaning-making literature for communities under siege.” A prophet like Deutero-Isaiah who speaks to the exiles who are still recovering from the trauma of the Babylonian invasion can be characterized as “a map of hope for the disoriented and dislocated people at risk of losing their bearings.” So how does a prophet go about talking to people who have been completely traumatized by the destruction of their city, watching their family and friends killed or taken away in shackles to a foreign land and who feel that God has deserted them?

The prophet in Deutero-Isaiah did not have an easy task. But, throughout the chapters of Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet is using some very creative imagery to help people think anew as to how to live in the midst of the terrible chaos that unexpectedly broke into their lives. For instance, in a previous chapter, God is depicted in a single breath as a mighty warrior who will come to deliver his people as well as a shepherd who presses the little lamb tightly to his bosom. And a little further, the prophet is using yet another unexpected combination of images when the divine warrior image is juxtaposed with the image of God as a woman in labour.

Today, for the first time we encounter the image of the suffering servant of God that serves as a wonderful example of the meaning-making prophetic task. The servant is described as the “weakest reed” and a “flickering candle.” However, because of God’s spirit that works through him, the servant will not be broken or quenched, rather he will faithfully continue his mission, establishing justice on the earth.

The servant offers a profound example of power in the midst of vulnerability. The power that is held up in the servant is a different kind of power. It is a power that does not scream or shout, which offers a sharp contrast with the brutal force executed by the empires of the day.

The servant is chosen by God for a mission of global scope that includes healing, teaching, and establishing justice. The servant’s deeds are part of the “new thing” that God is doing on behalf of exiled Jews, who find themselves driven to the far reaches of the earth.

It’s difficult to say anything about the specific historical identity of the “servant.” And the ambiguity may be intentional. But what is certain, is that the servant is a focal point of God’s promissory activity. Without exaggeration, we can say that this servant is not only the hope of Israel, but also of the whole world.

The lack of historical specificity may be due to the fact that the servant seems to be primarily a creature of hope and not of history. The servant only exists as a prayer, not as a person in history. And the editors of Isaiah seem

content to leave matters that way. The book of Isaiah has undergone significant redaction over centuries, and its many editors apparently felt no compulsion to explain the servant's identity.

The ministry of the servant is what it looks like when the Kingdom of God arrives anywhere, anytime - whether that be the sixth century BCE, first century CE, or the twenty-first century CE. When the servant arrives, so do justice, light, and freedom. The servant is a “new covenant shed for you and for all people”, a light to the nations, restoring sight to the blind, breaking prison chains, and the “new thing” that God is doing.

The passage closes with a surprising verse. New things are declared here; radically new things. There is a gentleness and “powerlessness” in the servant that is more powerful than the empty idols mentioned. The spirit given to the servant will enliven him in ways that are different to the breath and spirit which fills all creatures. Through this servant a covenant will be given for all. Early Christian writers identified Jesus as this servant in whom God found delight, and as the gentle bearer of justice and a light to the nations.

We should not think that Jesus was the only one through whom this prophecy was found to be fulfilled. Whoever the suffering servant was in the time of the exile; the prophet himself, some anonymous individual, or even the exilic community as a whole, the far more important question for us, well beyond that of the identity of the servant, is what the servant is called to do for the exilic people and just how he is called to do it.

What Isaiah had in mind for the servant was surely nearly unprecedented. This servant will bring justice; make no mistake about that. But he will do so quietly, mysteriously, and finally by self-offering for all. Such a radical idea! For us Christians it has become the most radical and crucial idea in all the world. It is from these answers that the early Christian community derived much of its convictions about the call and work of the one they came to call the Christ.

When the early Christians identified Jesus with Isaiah's servant, they implied, whether they knew it or not, that Jesus' primary goal in his earthly ministry was to bring justice to the nations and to root it deeply into the soil of the world. And just how is the servant to bring this justice to the earth? This servant will work to bring justice inexorably, certainly, assuredly, without fail, but he will do it quietly, unobtrusively, unassumingly. We will hardly know that he is at work at all! Justice will come, but it will come in ways that we rarely can know or appreciate.

The experience described in the passage had a profound effect on the Judean community. It challenged their thinking about how God acts in the world and the nature of God's power and sovereignty. It also made a way available for early Christians, and later the Church, to recognize in Jesus this very way of God, this 'new thing,' embodied altogether in an emphatically new way.

The remarkable thing we see in this text is how the people who have been traumatized are called not to do the typical human thing of what has been

called “circling the wagons”. Nationalism quite often tends to be a natural consequence of collective trauma. It would be so easy to find in these texts what may be called “an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you”. However, in Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet offers a vision of the world in which an individual or a group of people in the midst of brokenness, in spite of brokenness, and maybe even because of brokenness, will be a light to the nations.

For people today who find themselves in a state of chaos and despair, this powerful depiction of the suffering servant may speak to them in the following ways: First, in the midst of those times when chaos is rampant, when we are weighed down by the forces that seek to destroy life as we know it, we need to accept the fact that we often are no more than “bruised reeds” and “dimly burning wicks”.

As the songwriter-theologian Leonard Cohen says so beautifully in his song, ‘Anthem’: *“Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that is where the light gets in”*. That is where the light comes in. God’s grace and power works exactly there where we are broken, where we are most fragile, a perspective compellingly captured in the New Testament letter to the Corinthians: “We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure”.

This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are

perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

Second, in the midst of these most difficult times, when we feel helpless and out of control, we learn from the example of the suffering servant that we should seek to cultivate the power that we do have in the midst of our current state of vulnerability. Even in the midst of the most dire of circumstances, we still have the power to make a difference in the lives of the people around us.

As we have seen in the case of the suffering servant, the power is a remarkable power, not like the power of the worldly institutions, but a power that grows out of compassion, out of being concerned with the needs and concerns of the other. Even if we find ourselves in a completely hopeless situation, we can nurture compassion's power which means that even in the most disturbing of days, we have the ability to do good things, to look beyond our own problems, our own focus, and to direct our focus to the other.

During their time of despair, Isaiah shifts Israel's gaze from themselves back to the wide casting of God's promise and plan. This shift from focus on ourselves, to who we are in God, is what our Baptism begins for each one of us. And this becomes our trajectory throughout our life; our mission as members of God's great family. It's not about us at all. It's about our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with the world around us.

So in the season of Advent (a season of prayerful hope for Christ's coming),

we are right to read texts that celebrate the servant's coming in the past, present, and future. This is especially true, given that Christ's first coming only accomplished these things in a partial, hidden way. Justice remains an attainable ideal, darkness continues to obscure light and the distant lands beyond the sea continue to wait upon God's word of hope. And so, like the distant lands beyond the sea described in Isaiah, we too are still waiting on God's Word. **Amen.**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE -- DECEMBER 11, 2022 -- ADVENT 3A

Let us thank almighty God for revealing God's self in the most unlikely places: as a child in a stable and as a criminal on a cross. And let us rejoice in God's promise to hear our prayers, each of which will end with the words, "O God of joy...." and your response is: **Remember Your people.**

Almighty God, renew Your church with the joy that comes from knowing Your love, Your grace, and Your mercy.

O God of joy ... **Remember Your people.**

Almighty God, we pray for our bishops, pastors, deacons and lay leaders. Give them the assurance of Your love and protection, and make them strong and bold in their service to You and to Your church, so that through them You might teach us Your ways, and how we too can live our lives in service to others.

O God of joy ... **Remember Your people.**

Almighty God, we pray for our church, Grace Lutheran, and for the Place community who worship downstairs. Give us faith in Your guidance, and open our minds and hearts to whatever direction You wish us to go in the future.

O God of joy ... **Remember Your people.**

Loving God, we pray for all the churches of Victoria, and Vancouver Island, and British Columbia, and Canada. We trust that You know their needs, and we join them in their prayers for strength and courage as together we bear witness to Your salvation. Help us, dear God, to see You more clearly, love You more dearly, and follow You more nearly, day by day.

O God of joy ... **Remember Your people.**

Loving God, grant your Holy Spirit to the nations, and shine Your light into the dark places of this world. We pray especially for our beloved Canada, and for United States and all the European nations, and we pray for all democratic countries who are struggling to keep democracy alive.

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

Loving God, bless us in our aid-giving efforts to nations who are at war. Today we pray especially for the Ukraine, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Yemen. We pray for peace, O God, peace on earth and peace within nations.

We pray for peace within families who are in conflict, and for peace within individuals who have broken hearts or troubled minds.

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

Loving God, we pray for peace in our own hearts and minds, especially during this season as we celebrate the peace and joy that came to earth at Christmas in the person of Your Son. We pray that You would keep us and our families safe this season, and guide and protect us in the New Year.

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

Loving God, we pray for those who are imprisoned or isolated, and all those who long to be with loved ones this December. Sustain with your Spirit all those who are suffering in body or spirit and those whom we name aloud or silently in our hearts ...

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

Loving God, we pray for the health and welfare of our homebound members and friends and all those whom we name aloud or silently in our hearts ...

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

Loving God, we pray for the families of those who mourn the recent passing of their loved ones; and for any others today who are remembering loved ones who passed over to the Other Side. O God, we pray that, in Your good time, You would heal all injuries, comfort all grief, and right all wrongs.

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

O Christ, in your coming Kingdom, wolves will lie down with lambs and children will play without fear of attack by any animal or human. You have promised that even the wilderness and dry land will be glad and will rejoice over Your gifts of refreshing springs and Living Water. O Christ, we pray for those who are already rejoicing this month as they celebrate their birthdays and anniversaries. May all of us rejoice over Your love which came down at Christmas, and may we all come into that promised future Kingdom of joy and gladness, where all sorrow and sighing and sadness will disappear.

O God of joy ... **Remember your people.**

O come, O Come, Emmanuel, and hear our prayers.

Amen.