

December 10, 2023
Advent 2, Year B
Isaiah 64:1-9
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Words of Hope

Six years ago, on the First Sunday of Advent, I preached a sermon that almost destroyed my sons' faith. I remember it well, both the sermon and its unintended consequences. It was a sermon that was based on the Old Testament reading for the First Sunday in Advent, Year B. In that Old Testament reading, which was our Old Testament reading for last Sunday, the prophet, in the book of Isaiah, pleads with God to intervene in the world, the anguished cry of the prophet was, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." (Isaiah 64:1a)

I used that cry as a theme in my sermon, returning to those words, as I talked about the deep longings in the world and in our lives, the great need for healing in the world and in our lives, the great the need for God's intervention. I then talked about how God has intervened, how God has come to us in Jesus Christ, and comes to us in Jesus Christ now, in word, sacrament, prayer, miracles, and community, while we wait for the decisive return of Christ and the reign of God, but my boys, with their 7- and 8-year-old brains, did not hear any of that, any of how we can and do experience God in the here and now. All they heard was that the needs of the world were great and that God was apparently absent.

For a long time after I preached that sermon, I fielded questions from my two budding skeptics about why God didn't solve this problem or that problem. How were they supposed to believe in a God who was so apparently absent in the face of the world's great needs? They changed the prophet's cry, "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down," to a question, "Why doesn't God

tear open the heavens and come down?” or even to a dare, “Hey, God, why don’t you tear open the heavens and come down?” It was a challenging Advent and beyond, as these questions lasted for years, and, now that I’m bringing them up, will probably resurface. I guess the silver lining is that it proved that they actually listened to sermons.

Certainly, my sons, at any age, aren’t the only ones who have those kinds of questions, or that specific question. I’ve heard it from them, but I’ve certainly heard it from other people too. When is God doing to end the suffering of the world in a way that is obvious, decisive, conclusive? Put another way, when are we going to be saved from the brokenness of the world? When are we going to be saved from ourselves?

It’s never an irrelevant question and it’s a question that people of faith have asked for centuries, long before it was penned by the 6th century B.C. prophet known as Third Isaiah, long before my 7 and 8 year old boys took it as their own as part of their own spiritual development, and long since.

And yet, since those words were written down by the prophet in the 6th century, people of faith kept writing, kept worshiping, kept questioning, kept believing, kept hoping for the long looked-for, long-awaited God.

What has kept people engaged in this faith, that has grown and changed in some ways and in some ways stayed the same in a world, where the words of the prophet continue to be made so manifestly true:

“We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.”? (Isaiah 64:6a)

You might be wondering why I seem to be preaching a sermon about last Sunday’s Old Testament reading, but that’s because I think that it’s informed by this Sunday’s Old Testament reading. In today’s Old Testament reading we’re engaging in some of our predictable Advent time travel, moving back in time in our Old

Testament readings. Last week's reading was written around 520 B.C. but this week's reading comes from around 540 B.C., which means that it's older.

In 587 B.C. a calamity occurred in the nation of Judah, to the Jewish people. After years of negotiations and compromises, the Babylonians swept into the nation and the city of Jerusalem, razed the countryside, looted and burned the city of Jerusalem and the Temple, and carried most of the population into exile in Babylon.

This calamity led to the writing of the prophetic books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and Psalm 137 which says,

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

⁴ How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites (another word for Babylonians)
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations! (Psalm 137:1-7)

Those were words that were penned by a people who had lost everything. Despair ran deep in their veins. When their vineyards and pastures were trampled by the boots of an invading army, when their city burned, when their Temple burned, when their holy things made of precious metals and jewels were carried off by the Babylonians, and melted down, their sacredness disregarded, forgotten, certainly, they, of all people, would have had reason to cry out to an apparently absent God, "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

Years passed. Decades passed. People who remembered the calamity died. Children who had never seen Jerusalem were born. Some of the people forgot who they were, who they had been. Some of the people assimilated into Babylonian culture, into Babylonian religion, worshiping the apparently victorious pagan gods of the Babylonians.

But some people remembered, some people did, indeed, find ways to keep singing the Lord's song in a foreign land. Some people kept telling the stories of their people and their God in captivity. Some people found ways to keep worshiping their God even without a Temple. Some people remembered the deeds that God had done in their past, when they were in captivity in Egypt, when they wandered in the wilderness, when their kings had ruled, and they clung to their faith.

And to them the prophet spoke, saying, in the words of today's Old Testament reading,

¹Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid, (Isaiah 40:1-2a)

³A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

⁹Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.
11He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:9-11)

Words of hope, spoken to people in despair. Words of rescue and deliverance, words of promise and restoration. Words of hope that bore fruit in the events in the world around them. A new emperor was coming to town. A new empire was in charge. And with this change of empire there was a change of policy and a promise of rescue. The promise was that those who wanted to go, would be returned to their homeland.

And to those who remembered Jerusalem, to those who yearned for their home, to those who dreamed of rebuilding their Temple, this policy shift, was an answer to prayer. Their hope had not been in vain. Their prayers had been heard. God had answered and was bringing them home. “Comfort, O comfort, my people.”

In the words of the Third Isaiah, we hear that the people had, once again, run up against difficulty. It turns out that it was hard to rebuild a nation, hard to rebuild a Temple, hard to rebuild a community that had been shattered by warfare and violence, hard to rebuild faith, in a community that had been uprooted by the powers of this world. And so, we hear the cry of the prophet, “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

But that cry did not come out of a vacuum and it did not go into a vacuum. It was not the cry of someone who believed that God would never come, would never act. It was the cry of one who knew that God could act, who knew that God had acted for God’s people in the past, and who waited with hope for God to act again.

My boys heard the prophet's cry as one of despair, the cry of a person, the cry of a people who had believed in God, but who had never experienced God's presence. The cry of a people who had been faithful, but who had never experienced God's faithfulness returned to them, God's action on their behalf.

But in its historical context it is the exact opposite. It is the cry of one who is sure that God can and will act on behalf of God's people and is just hoping, praying, even demanding that that action will be soon!

Advent time travel with me, to past Jesus' birth, when John the Baptist stood in the wilderness, by the Jordan River, and proclaimed the coming of the promised one, the coming of the Messiah, that God had, indeed, torn open the heavens and come down.

The people in our scriptures did not proclaim their good news, did not cry their cries, did not engage with their God in a vacuum. Their hope, their promises, their trust was based on what God had done in the past in their lives or for their people or on what God was doing right then, in that moment to save God's people. They had the memories and stories of their community to sustain them and they had their eyes wide open to what God might be doing in their midst.

And for that reason, even in their times of hopelessness, even into the darkness and despair of the world, they were able to speak, "Tear open! Comfort, comfort. Prepare the way! Repent!"

The stories that sustained them are our stories too. The promises that they saw fulfilled are our promises too. The generations of faithfulness that upheld them are for us too. And so are their Advent promises and their Advent questions and their Advent commands. Words that for us, who have seen what we have seen, who know what we know, who have lived what we have we have lived, can give us strength and hope for our time. For God is with us, Jesus is here. And Jesus is coming. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.