

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 8, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang – Sermon for Parkside Lutheran Church

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The late Edward Kirsten Perry, former bishop of the Upstate New York Synod and former pastor here at Parkside once said that the role of the pastor could be likened to the role of the shepherd, which also was two-fold. He said the role of the shepherd was to coddle the baby lambs in his arms and kick the rams in the behind.

The prophet Isaiah was such a shepherd/prophet. The 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah covers a significant period in the history of Israel, dating from 740 B.C. well into that period of history known as the Babylonian exile, which most scholars place in the late 6th century B.C. and corresponding to the fall of Babylon and the rise of the Persian empire under Cyrus.

In the first part of the book, Isaiah is preoccupied with warning the Israelites what fate will befall them if they abandon their faith in God and chase after other gods, namely the gods of the Egyptians and the Assyrians, who in 740 BC were gathering a campaign to conquer most of the middle east. They did and in 721 BC destroyed what we now call the entire northern kingdom of Israel, leaving only the southern kingdom of Judah and with it its capital city Jerusalem, to survive.

The second half of the book of Isaiah takes place clearly 150 years later, when the Babylonian empire, which replaced the Assyrian empire as the seat of power in the Middle East, was on the decline and the Persian Empire was on the rise. The second half of the book deals with a displaced Israel, living as it were, under house arrest, in Mesopotamia, far from home. You may have heard the term, the Babylonian captivity.

In the book that bears his name one finds examples of both of these roles of the prophet/shepherd, passages of extraordinary beauty that offer words of encouragement and hope and passages of harsh reprimand.

When as a nation, Israel was contemplating resisting the Assyrian empire and allying itself with Egypt in a last ditch attempt to save itself, Isaiah was ruthless in his attack and warning.

But when Israel was captive and living in exile, devoid of hope, the prophet writes in such a loving and caring way that it's hard to believe it comes from the same book, no less the same author. Most scholars agree therefore, that we are in fact dealing with two different authors if not two different schools of writing within the same book. Some have even gone so far as to call Chapters 1-39 First Isaiah, with chapters 40-55 comprising second Isaiah and finally, chapters 56-66 making up third Isaiah, a section that returns to the chastisement motif, this time directed toward the Jews who returned to Jerusalem after the Persians allowed them to go home from Babylon.

The section we have before us this morning as our first reading for the day comes from this second Isaiah section that attempts to offer comfort and solace and hope to the exiled community under the Babylonian oppressors. It is filled with imagery of hope and makes constant reference to the nearness of God, at a time when the Israelites felt furthest from his presence.

Remember that ever since King David unified worship in Jerusalem and Solomon built his magnificent temple, Jews saw the temple in Jerusalem as the focal point of their religion if not personal piety.

When the Babylonians destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah they leveled the magnificent temple of Solomon and so the people were not only displaced and exiled, but exiled with the knowledge that home and the temple were no longer there, and consequently, felt that God had abandoned them and they Him.

With this context in mind, hear the words of second Isaiah again; you may want to read along:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
²²It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
²³who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

²⁴Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

First the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, now the Persians and soon the Greeks and then the Romans

²⁵To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
²⁶Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

Even though over the past two centuries you have been scattered like the wind to the four corners of the earth and now return home.

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Haven't you had days when you feel like an exile? Haven't you had days when home and the safety and warmth and security of life seem as if they're way off in some far country? I have - and I know you have especially lately.

Well, Isaiah has words for us to hear. He comes in the midst of our despair and heartache to remind us of that which we knew, at one time, but somehow misplaced.

"Have you not known," he says. "Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" The One who sits in the heavens and who created the world and the universe in which we live, who stretched it out like a curtain and spread it out like a tent for us to live in, this same One is the One who knows where you are and whose you are and in the midst of your despair when the world feels either too big for us to matter in or too little for us and it's closing in on us on all sides and there's no place to go to get away from it, reminds us that even these hard times, are temporary. Like the tyrant rulers who come and go, so this too will pass and in spite of what you have come to think, you will still be the one who I know and whom I call by name and I will rescue and restore you, because God does not faint or grow weary. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

- For those of us who are tired.
- For those of us who are hanging by a thread, whose good health seems to be slipping away as fast as our memory,
- whose world is changing so quickly that it's impossible to keep track of it all much as we would like to,

- for those of us whose children are growing up way too fast, who are left wondering where the hair went or where the grey came from and whose stomach is this, who can still remember as if it was yesterday, OUR first day at college, OUR first paycheck, OUR wedding day.
- For those who have seen war and had hoped never to see another one
- For those who fear the current one will never end
- For those whose jobs may be at risk
- For those facing economic uncertainty
- For all these reasons and then some...

To such as these, Isaiah says,

“³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”

You know, in today’s gospel reading, some may find it perplexing to hear of Jesus running away and hiding from the crowds who were gathering around him to be healed. In today’s gospel when the disciples come looking for him in the morning after he healed Peter’s mother-in-law, yes the first Pope was married, Jesus says to them, why don’t we go somewhere else, let’s go to the neighboring towns because they haven’t heard the message I’ve come to give them.

At first reading it seems odd that just as his reputation for healing and performing miracles seems to be reaching its peak, Jesus says, “Let’s move on.” Well, if I could be so bold as to suggest why I think he did that. I think Jesus did this on this occasion and on many occasions as Scripture tells us, (recall how many times he heals someone and then tells the one healed or those who witnessed the healing, to say nothing to anyone.) I think Jesus did this because he knew that more important than his miracles was his message. More important than any healing he might effect, was the message he had to proclaim about God and the relationship God wants to have with us.

Jesus knew that if he healed someone, they’d be grateful and grateful for a time, until they fell ill again, or worse and there they’d be, back knocking on his door, asking for the latest elixir or the next miracle. But what he wanted to give them, and us, was something more than that, something more than vain and temporary hope. He wanted to give them, and us, that hope which would endure beyond the next illness, if not through it, beyond the next test, the next hardship, and ultimately, beyond the next death.

When I’m sick, I wish to be healed, when I hear that someone else is ill, I wish them to be cured, and I pray for healing, with all my heart. And sometimes healing comes, and

sometimes it does not. What I need Jesus for, what I need God for, is not to be my miracle worker, as much as I need Him to be my hope, my ultimate hope, the hope that will sustain me through every illness, through all my life, and then, beyond the life that I know. I can live with almost anything, so can you, I can endure most any hardship, so can you, but I cannot live without hope. The hope that comes from the knowledge that no matter what befalls me, God will be there, to lift me up and keep me. It is that hope that Jesus came to give, it is that hope of which Isaiah spoke of in times of ultimate despair, and it is that hope to which I commend your faith today.

For those who wait for the LORD, they shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”

Amen.