

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Advent 2B, Sunday, December 7, 2014  
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8, Ps 85

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

On this second Sunday in Advent, we focus on peace. It comes not a moment too soon as Christmas preparations ramp up and the question continually ringing through the air is: "Are you ready for Christmas?" Are the outdoor lights up? Is your home decorated? Is the baking done? Are presents bought? wrapped? paid for? The expectations are seemingly endless. And it is amidst these expectations that we enter a time of worship and focus on peace... the deep and abiding peace of God. It is a peace born of the hope we focused on last week.

From the prophet Isaiah we hear the beginning of peace with a desperately needed word from the Lord God to a thoroughly broken people. The old promises of land, of nationhood and of David's everlasting line ended in devastation when the Babylonians had had enough with Judah. They besieged Jerusalem until finally the walls were breached, King Zedekiah was taken in chains to Babylon and, as the story is told in 2 Kings 25, King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, "burned the house of the Lord, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem..." and they carried into exile "the rest of the people who were left in the city..." Everything was lost. All that the people held dear, not the least of which being God's promise and assurance that David's line would last forever, all of it was violently destroyed.

Taking up life in Babylon, was a wilderness experience of profound impact. Unlike the first experience of wilderness wandering, this time the wilderness wasn't a challenging in-between place after being saved from slavery and leading to the Promised Land. The wilderness of exile comes after the dream of living in the Promised Land had been fulfilled, after more promises had been made, leading to... what? Seeming nothingness. Had God forgotten them completely? The wilderness of exile is a time for questions, like those today's psalmist asks in the middle verses we didn't say: "Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?" It's ironic that our lectionary skips these because without the questions, God's response doesn't sound nearly so sweet. God can only speak peace if there is turmoil. Salvation only matters if we know trouble. The Babylonian exile was a time of turmoil and trouble in the extreme such that peace and salvation were but distant, impossible dreams.

It is into this deep despair that the prophet calls: "comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." It is a word of comfort and of promise... We are still people whom God loves and cares for. God is coming once again. God is about to do a new thing. Take heart and be prepared.

Our psalmist today actually writes from a different time of need, even though the questions of lament are the same. Psalm 85 likely comes from the time promised in Isaiah 40 - the time of restoration of Jerusalem. After the Persian King Cyrus overtook Babylon and established a new empire, exiled people were sent home, fulfilling the high hopes of the envisioned new life in the new Jerusalem. The reality of new life was, however, far more difficult than the dreams. As one commentator describes: "Vision gave way to disappointment. God's goodness was swallowed up in the harsh drudgery and the daunting problems of daily life."

(Davidson, 281) And so the children and grandchildren of the former exiles cry to God once more: "Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?" The psalmist has already recalled the fulfillment of God's earlier promise of restoration to Jerusalem: "You have been gracious to your land, O Lord, you have restored the good fortune of Jacob." And so the psalmist goes on to express the peace that God wants God's people to embrace: "Mercy and truth and met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven. The Lord will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase." It may be tough right now, but good times will come again. God is about to do a new thing. Take heart and be prepared. Believe in God and be at peace.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as told by Mark, remembers these ancient times of trouble and promise, hope and peace. Mark begins his good news story of Jesus Christ, grounded in the old news story. Jesus was not born into a vacuum, but rather into a community with deep roots and a long tradition, and Mark intentionally and overtly seeks to bring that tradition into the hearts and minds of his readers. He does so with a quote from Isaiah 40: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." It's not an exact quote, but it's close enough that we know what verse in Isaiah he's referencing. This rest is actually a combination of verses from both Exodus and the prophet Malachi. Exodus tells the story of wandering in the wilderness the first time and brings to mind the uncertainty, fear and responsibility that came in between slavery in Egypt and entering the Promised Land. Malachi came much later, once the Babylonian exiles had returned to the land, the Jerusalem Temple was re-built and the Israelite people were transforming into the Jewish community. And so in 2 short verses, Mark takes over a thousand years of history, struggle, fulfillment, devastation, joy, pain, prophecy, promise and prayer and focuses it onto one man - John the baptizer.

John does not appear in the wilderness as a blank slate. John does not magically appear out of a vacuum. There is no creation ex nihilo... newness out of nothing. John appears in the wilderness as a prophet in a long line of prophets - who all spoke the word of God. Mark begins his telling of the good news of Jesus Christ, by bringing together the fullness of what has gone before. And he does so in a unique way. He took what he knew of the past, of God's promises and their fulfillment, and used it in a creative and faithful way, to understand contemporary times and the new story that was being lived out in his community. God came once again. God did a new thing. And God will do it again. God is coming again. God will do another new thing. Take heart and be prepared. Believe in God and be at peace. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Over a thousand years of history, struggle, fulfillment, devastation, joy, pain, prophecy, promise and prayer... This is what Peter too recalls as he speaks of the Lord Jesus' coming again, writing that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." With God and in God, time means something different than in the rest of our lives. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief..." And so we need to prepare not in anxiety and stress and fear, but in peace - for when God comes, when the new heavens and the new earth for which we wait comes to fulfillment, salvation comes with it. In the meantime, God is just patiently waiting for us to be ready. Today is a day of peace because our hope is not without history. History has shown that as God came to do a new thing in days gone by, so will God come again. We just need to take heart and be prepared. We need to believe in God and be at peace.

The call of the prophet John today, like the call of so many prophets before him, comes out of the wilderness. The wilderness is a metaphor for being lost, being uncomfortable, being

scared or uncertain of the way forward. The wilderness is a dangerous place and yet one of raw beauty. It might be a broken relationship, a physical change or illness, a need for discernment for some kind of choice, or facing a life change through a birth or death, through retirement or the kids leaving home. The call of the prophet John today, coming out of this wilderness, is a call to peace born of repentance. To repent is to change in some way, to turn around in a way that makes life better. In what way do you want your life to be better? And what do you need to change this Advent, to make it so? In what way have you turned away from God and your own soul, and in what way do you need to turn back? What do you need to do to prepare for God to come into your life? In what ways could renewed belief in God bring you peace?

I don't know what your answers are to these questions, but I do know that whatever they are, the answers will be in continuity with what has gone before, with who you are in your deepest and best self, and will be completely unique to the circumstances of this moment in your life. God's new work won't come out of a vacuum and will not be created ex nihilo. God's new work in your life will bring together the fullness of what has gone before - your struggles and fulfillment, your devastation and joy, the pain, promise and prayer of your life - will bring to birth something beautiful. So take heart and be prepared; believe in God, repent, and be at peace; for this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.