

“Here is Your God!”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

2nd Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2011, Year B

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Did you hear the news? Jesus is coming! He’s coming into the world again at Christmas in just a few short weeks. History is about repeat itself. What are we doing to get ready? What should we be doing to get ready?

Some of us get ready for Christmas all year. By getting ready for Christmas, we mean shopping. We all know people – even ourselves - who shop all year ‘round for Christmas gifts, buying things on sale when they see them, putting them away for safe-keeping in closets or under the bed. The trouble is, we have to then deal with the presents that we received last year - untouched and unused - that we have stuffed into those closets or put under our beds. It’s a relief to know the word “re-gifting” has entered our holiday vocabulary.

As Christians, there is another kind of “getting ready” that we do all year. In the Christian year we get ready by telling the story of Jesus, from beginning to end; then when we get to the end, we start again at the beginning. For the early church, it was not enough to start at the beginning – Jesus’ birth – but to go back even further, to the ancient scriptures of Israel, for a look at the big picture – God’s cosmic plan for the salvation of the world, in which Jesus will play a major role.

So today we hear from the prophet Isaiah, speaking 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Across those many hundreds of years, an ancient theme echoes: there will come a time in human history, when a Messiah will come who will rescue Israel from her oppressors and banish them from Jerusalem and their homeland.

At the time of Isaiah, Israel had suffered attacks and occupations by many enemies. The theological explanation for all this suffering was that God was not pleased with the sins of the Israelites and therefore, God turned away from them and left them unprotected. Israel had endured a lot and prayed to God for redemption.

The prayer-poem of Isaiah that we read today speaks of the day coming soon when God would realize that the people had had enough. God would become tender and come to the people saying,

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

Enough, enough, says God, I hear your pain, and I am coming to hold you tenderly to myself, saying, ¹¹“I tend my flock like a shepherd: I gather the lambs in my arms and carry them close to my heart; I gently lead those that have young.....Here is your God!”

Oh, how lovely that sounds to a distressed people, who have lived in the midst of war, of food rationing, disruption of trade, of soldiers bullying them, of farmlands taken away from them, of desecration of their sacred places, of the stripping of power from their city and village elders. Oh, how great that day will be when God returns to rescue us!

And God promises to turn the world upside-down to save them. God will send One who will make the announcement, to proclaim the coming of God:

³ “A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD^[a]; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.^[b]

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

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Who will God send? Isaiah? Will Isaiah be the long-awaited Messiah who will put this radical plan into action? No, it won’t be Isaiah. Isaiah is a herald, an announcer of the one who is to come. Isaiah is the one who will point to the one who saves, the one who is to come, saying, “Here is your God!” In fact, Isaiah name means, “The Lord saves.” But when will that be? How much longer must Israel wait?

Unfortunately for Israel, they will wait for hundreds of years more before the Messiah appears. Isaiah received his prophecy from God in around 700 BCE, and in 586BCE the entire city of Jerusalem was destroyed by another enemy and all its inhabitants were captured and marched to the far off region of Babylon, where they would stay for another 100 or so years until they were allowed to return. That is enough time for the original captives to die away and a new generation to be born that had never seen their family’s homeland. Where was their God? Had God forgotten them? And had they forgotten their God?

The exiles remembered their roots by telling their story, over and over again. They found ways to mark holy days without attracting too much attention in Babylon. They told their children, and their children told their children, and the stories never died. They lived according to their captors' time and traditions, but they kept their own time and traditions, too. Just as we Christians keep our own calendar, the Israelites kept their sacred calendar. At least they tried to. Some drifted away from their traditions, assimilating into Babylonian society by intermarrying, eating forbidden foods or even worshipping Babylonian gods. Some forgot all about the promises of God, mainly because those promises were not being realized. How much longer must they wait for God to act in their lives? Where was their God?

Well, it will be a very long time, 400 years later, to be exact, before God's promises come true. That is when a new herald comes on the scene, John the Baptist, who is introduced to us in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Mark first introduces John by quoting from Isaiah,

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way –
a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘
Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

Isaiah takes pride of place in this New Testament gospel because Mark was sure that Isaiah's prophecy about God coming to rescue God's people came true with the advent of Jesus Christ. Mark heard Isaiah loud and clear when he heard John the Baptist cry,

“After me comes one more powerful than I,
the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.”

Why is John not worthy to even kneel at the feet of Jesus? Because this herald knows Jesus is God incarnate, in the flesh, Immanuel, God-with-us. John knows this. John is not giving himself any airs, even though he is Jesus' cousin and a close relative. John is merely stepping into the shoes of Isaiah, as he points toward Jesus as the Messiah of God; in fact, Jesus is God in the flesh, as a human being. John is pointing to Jesus as Isaiah pointed to the Messiah, saying, “Here is your God!”

There is a trajectory here that Mark wants us to pay attention to. Isaiah was a powerful and charismatic prophet. Isaiah was so influential and so foundational to understanding God's message because people believed God spoke through him.

Yet his favor with God never got in the way of his message. Isaiah pointed, not to himself, but to the Messiah who was to come.

Likewise, John the Baptist did not give himself airs. He lived in the desert, far from any village, collecting whatever food he could in the wilderness – the gospel says, “locusts and wild honey.” His clothes were rough, made of camel hair held together with a leather belt. He may have been a strange and frightening figure, but his preaching must have been powerful, for many people traveled out to the desert to see him. Yet, he did not claim any authority for himself. Like Isaiah, he pointed not to himself, but to the Messiah who was almost there, saying, “Here is your God!”

And then came Jesus who, although he had the miraculous powers of God was also entirely human, able to connect with us through his amazing ability to attract followers with just a word; able to heal and make people whole; able to teach with such wise words that turned conventional thinking upside down; willing to cry with us and sometimes be exhausted by us and our incredible, never-ending needs.

But still, Jesus did not point to himself as the Savior – Jesus pointed the way to God. Everything Jesus taught us, he did so that we might find a way to connect with God, turn regularly to God, to put God at the center of everything we do. Jesus taught us to remember our sacred history and how long God has been pursuing us, challenging us, calling us to covenant, forgiving us when we fail, and loving us as only our God can. Jesus pointed, not to himself, but to God, saying, “Here is your God!”

It is by traveling through the cycle of the Christian year that we can do what Jesus taught us and what thousands of years of Israel’s history show us: God has a plan for us, for our redemption and our salvation. Those are fancy theological words for rescuing us and showing us how we can rescue ourselves. We get caught up in forms of captivity, as did ancient Israel, much of our own making. We forget what Christmas is supposed to be about, and we veer off the path to God and find ourselves in the desert, caught in the quick sand of poor choices, lost faith, and separation from God. Life’s journey is not always sweet like a spoonful of honey; rather it is sometimes filled with clouds of locusts. But if we remember who we belong to, who loves us and is constantly pointing the way and cheering us on – we can escape from the destructive things that hold us captive and see clearly our way to healthy and whole relationships with God and with one another.

How can we get ready to hear this story again? How can our thousands of years of faithful history repeat itself? Like last year's Christmas presents, unnoticed and unwanted, we can "re-gift" the energy we expend on the Christmas rush and point it towards our relationship with God. We can slow down, take a breath, remember what Christmas truly means to us as Christians, and consider the big picture of God's plan - to rescue us, to comfort us, to hold us to our covenant, to forgive us, to teach us to forgive others, and to love us – and to point the way again to Jesus who is coming to proclaim to all, "Here is your God!" Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

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