

## *Advent restoration*

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*Isaiah 40:1-11*

The book of Isaiah tells a complete story but it is a compilation of a number of parts, each from a particular historical situation. Chapters 1 to 39 are set in the eighth century BC. The people were still living in Judah with Jerusalem at its heart and the Temple — the scene of Isaiah's great vision in chapter 6 — is still standing.

When we turn to chapters 40 to 55 of the book, we find ourselves in the 6th century BC; many of the people are in exile in Babylon, Judah's monarchy is a thing of the past, the cities of Judah are desolate, the Temple lies in ruins.

The Assyrians were the main enemy in the first part of the book; Babylon is now the ruler, though the end of its rule is prophesied and was soon to come — in 539BC at the hands of the Persians.

Cyrus, ruler of Persia, already prominent, is the one chosen to fulfil the God's purpose and decree the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple.

In the first part of the book, the prophecy of Isaiah of Jerusalem is measured and stately, as he warns of impending disaster — which happened with the Babylonian conquest and the carrying away of Judah's leadership and many others into exile.

But now, there's a different note. Beginning with chapter 40 — today's reading — we find prophecy and poetry merged in lyrical, triumphant song, in words of beauty and power.

Divine judgment has already taken place; Jerusalem has received from God "double for all its sins." Now the prophet's task is to "speak tenderly" to Jerusalem, to tell a people in despair that

- God is no longer coming to judge
- God will release them from bondage
- God will restore the shattered foundations of the homeland, with pardon, deliverance and restoration.

It's a proclamation of good news. It's an Advent message.

- The people who dwell in darkness hear that a new day is dawning.
- The captives are told that deliverance is at hand.
- The broken-hearted are comforted.
- There's an excitement and expectancy of events about to happen.
- Israel is forgiven.
- The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is drawing near.

In verse 3 the prophet says: "A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of [God], make straight in the desert a highway for our God." From Mark chapter 1 — this morning's Gospel — we are used to the translation (from the Septuagint) that makes this a "voice crying in the wilderness." — which is what John was.

But in the Isaiah text, the prophet is speaking about the wilderness, not in it. The prophet says that even in the wilderness, God's pathways will be prepared — a place of dry barrenness will become the place of God. The people will be led through the wilderness, along "the highway of God" just as they were in the exodus from Egypt.

This new exodus will reveal God's glory to all humanity. Even though we humans are weak and mortal — like the grass that withers, and the flower that fades (the text says) there is hope because word of our God will stand forever.

For the ancient Hebrews, hope was focussed on Jerusalem, and Mount Zion — God's dwelling place in the midst of God's people.

The prophet brings together two great traditions of Israel — the liberation of Israel in the Exodus and God's choice of Zion.

The collapse of Babylon and the rise of Persia was a political event with a political result: the release of the exiles to return to their homeland. But the prophet interprets the political future spiritually — as the coming of God to make Zion the centre of a kingdom of righteousness and peace to include the whole world.

The theme is restoration. Restoration and renewal are constant themes in scripture. Deuteronomy (in chapters 29 and 30) records that, long before, God had warned the people through Moses that disobedience could lead to the curse of exile and captivity, but that if they returned to the Lord with obedience.

“then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, ... Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. The Lord your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.”

Zephaniah chapter 3 says:

“The Lord your God ... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love ... At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.”

This year at St. Philip's we have been blessed in many ways and much has been done. Yet it has been a tough year and we still mourn a great loss. Let the Advent message for us in this new year be one of restoration hope.

Let's receive the message of comfort and of restoration — a restoration that is a renewal: renewed life, renewed fruitfulness, renewed strength and renewed hope.

That is not to say that we are not enjoying the good things of God now. We are, and we are deeply grateful. Yet God's advent still more. When God restores the result is better than before. Haggai 2.9 The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, says the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace.

God's restoration is much more than steady-as-she goes.

It's more than putting things back as they were — and certainly more than putting things back the way we think we remember that they might have been.

In Amos chapter 9, God promises:

“I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.”

Restoration and fruitfulness are promised. But someone has to plant the vineyards, gather the fruit and press the wine. God promises that the harvest will be abundant, but ploughing and sowing and reaping are work.

God promised that the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt. And so they were. But someone had to make bricks, cut stones, and build with them. The story of the rebuilding — in Ezra and Nehemiah — shows us that there many roles; not only for the builders, but those who guarded them and those who gave money and goods. And before all of that, there was rather long walk, from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

Yes, it was a big challenge. We have challenges in front of us. Yet the people were told not to fear. Nor should we be fearful. In today's reading from Isaiah:

“Get 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!”

For us, now, the work of God, the presence of God, is good news, good news to be shared, good news to be proclaimed fearlessly — fearlessly because our Lord will shepherd us, take care of us and travel with us.

Despite the challenging work and the loud proclamation of good tidings, the God's restoration is gentle, patient when need be, and full of inner quietness and peace. We spend this Advent with new hope, as we allow God to prepare us for the coming of new things in our life together in Christ. But it is a gentle preparation that comes from God's Spirit within each of us. The last verse of today's Isaiah reading says:

“He 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.”

Is not Jesus, whose Advent we celebrate, the great shepherd of the sheep and the one who makes all things new?