

Isaiah 40:1-11

December 7, 2008

South Plains

2nd Sunday of Advent

Waiting With Jerusalem

Jerusalem is waiting. All Jerusalem lives in a state of expectancy, strung between hope and despair like the catgut on a violin. Sometimes the key of history turns so tightly that the string expects to snap, and is sorely tempted to think anything would be better than living with such tension. Sometimes the key of history loosens so that the slack of boredom sets in. Whatever her circumstances, Jerusalem is still waiting.

Perhaps it's the nature of a people to wait. Jerusalem is not just the name of the old capital of Israel. Jerusalem is the ideal every Western civilization dreams of achieving, a kind of heaven on earth. A twelfth century monk put this ideal in an old hymn:

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest,
Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice
oppressed.

I know not, O I know not, what joys await us there,
What radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond
compare.

"The city upon a hill" that the Puritans yearned to establish in the New World was modeled on the holy city of Zion. We are waiting with Jerusalem to build that city in America.

I know you will tell me that Jerusalem has been waiting since King David died. It's true. Even today, the people wait for another pious, godly ruler who will inspire their secular nation to worship the one, true God. They want another victorious giant-slayer who can clear Palestine of all their enemies, secure their borders and put their fears to rest. They want what we all want, a uniter who can bring together all the tribes, not only north and south, but all the racial ethnic groups, all the ingredients that make up not a mush, but gourmet fare to nourish the soul of a people. Jerusalem is waiting.

When the prophet of Isaiah, chapter 40, comes on the scene, Jerusalem has been waiting for half a century after the exile for a liberator who could set free their brothers and sisters from the slavery of exile in Babylon. At least, that's what the people left behind in Jerusalem have seen as their hope: the return of the exiles. Without their leadership, the city is condemned to poverty. Her citizens wait.

In the providence of God, Jerusalem gets a liberator. He is not a Jewish savior, but he did conquer Babylon and he did tell the exiles they could return. The trouble is that they were like so many people forced to migrate to another country. The Jews in Babylon had made new lives for themselves. They were not sure they wanted to travel hundreds of miles across the desert to a place no one had seen for more than a generation.

And, so the prophet of the Lord becomes a travel agent. He must target two cities. He needs to convince reluctant Jews in Babylon to come home and build a new city, and he needs to comfort discouraged Jews in Jerusalem. Both groups need to believe that the Lord is doing a new thing in the ruined city.

Everyone who remembers Jerusalem is waiting for a messiah whether they know it or not. We are waiting, in the words of the Gospel According to Mark, for “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.”

The prophet knew what people needed to hear:
Comfort,

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem

She has served her term,

Her penalty is paid,

She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

The first half of the book of Isaiah is a word of judgment because the people have taken injustice and profanity for granted. For those with ears to hear, the word of the Lord cuts deep. The second half which begins with chapter forty is a word of comfort that answers God's judgment with forgiveness.

Some of us are waiting this Advent for words of comfort, words of strength for unexpected burdens, words of forgiveness for sins we cannot name aloud.

Often we simply do not have the words to express our sins before God, the messes we have made that we do not fully understand, our failure to do something right in those hopeless situations. We can be tormented by the questions, “What did I do wrong? What did I fail to do?” Isaiah offers comfort to a heavy conscience.

But, comfort by itself is only a start. Jerusalem is waiting for more. “A voice cries out... prepare the way of the Lord... then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together (40:3).” They are waiting for the glory of the Lord, waiting for the Lord's Advent.

People are so desperate for glory that any wondrous experience may seem like a window into the life of God. It may be the ecstasy of sex, a mystic feeling of nearness, a beautiful sunset or a drug-induced high. Whether the rush of emotion we get from such experiences are good, bad or indifferent, they are not the same as the glory promised for the season of God's advent.

We are still waiting with Jerusalem. There's a British comedy on Saturday night TV about an older couple who live in a retirement center. It's the title of the show that intrigues me. It's called “Waiting For God.” The characters are waiting to die. It's a comedy only because we are all waiting for God in that sense; and the script catches the absurdity of everyday life when the end is God.

It is the genius of a prophet to recognize the absurdity of human existence, not as a tragedy but as a comedy that has a happy ending because God waits at the conclusion. The glory of all human achievements and experiences will fade like the flower of the field, like the lawns of last August that withered without rain. What endures is the word of the Lord.

And, so we are waiting with Jerusalem for a word from God, a word as true today as it ever was, a word utterly dependable, a promise worth waiting to see it come to pass. Advent supplies that word. Isaiah speaks to you and me as surely as he spoke to the people of his own time:

Lift up your voice with strength,

South Plains, herald of good tidings;

Lift it up, do not fear;

Say to the cities and counties,

“Here is your God!”

We are waiting for a word we can believe in, the advent of faith. Waiting to believe, if only someone would tell us that everything we have been waiting for is here. When that day comes, we will rest like a lamb gently laid by the shepherd beside the mother sheep.