

Bigger Than Christmas

1st Weekend of Advent – December 2/3, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak 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.

³A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the
LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for
our God.

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

⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the
field.

*Advent is a time of preparation. But preparation
for what? For a bolt of cosmic lightning that
changes everything.*

"Advent" comes from the Latin, *advenire*, meaning
"arrival." The advent season is a time of preparation
for an arrival. But of what . . . or of whom?

It is easy to see Advent as a time of preparation for,
well . . . Christmas morning. Shopping, food, trees,
parties, decorations, and all the rest. Sometimes it
seems almost overwhelming, crowding out anything
resembling a Lenten time of preparation.

But when we step back for a moment we remember
that Christmas is actually about Jesus. So, in a way
we'd be right to see the "arrival" as the birth of the
baby Jesus. But we'd still be falling short of the
larger story. It is today's Scripture passage that leads
us toward the true "arrival" for which we are
preparing.

How Good the News?

The light seems brightest when we step out of a
dark room. The thrill of victory is made sweeter by
the agony of defeat. I could go on piling up clichés,
for we all know that Good News is better

⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon
it;

surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get 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!"

¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹He 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.

Advent and the Christian Year

The Christian year is organized around two cycles. The first is the Christmas Cycle: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The season of Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and begins the Christian year. In the Christian calendar, Christmas is a twelve-day festival that concludes with Epiphany, which, by Christian tradition, marks the arrival of the wise men.

The second cycle in the Christian year is the Easter Cycle: Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Lent is the forty-day period before Easter. Pentecost, marking the arrival of the Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 2), falls fifty days after Easter.

Within each cycle, there is a season of preparation: Advent and Lent. These seasons are symbolized by the color purple. Hence, our paraments (the colored altar cloths) have been changed from green (for the "ordinary" time between Pentecost and Advent) to purple.

Purple is the color of both penitence and royalty. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of repentance and preparation, but I don't know that "repent" and "Advent" usually go together in our minds. Yet, the traditional Advent scriptures always include the ministry of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Some of our most enduring Christmas stories, such as Scrooge and the Grinch, are stories of repentance and transformed lives. Advent is to be a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child, our Master and Savior.

Reading Isaiah 40-66

The *Thru the Bible Reading* plan divides Isaiah into two parts. We read chapters 1-39 in Sep/Oct, and have been reading psalms for most of November. Now, beginning with chapter 40, we return to Isaiah and will stay with it until the end of the reading plan. Why the split reading?

Isaiah is the most complex of all the prophetic writings. There are two basic sections, written with different historical contexts.

The first section, chapters 1-39, are set in the period of Isaiah's ministry, about 700 years before Jesus. Isaiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah as the northern kingdom of Israel was under enormous pressure from the Assyrians, who eventually overran Israel. These chapters are mainly concerned with the Assyrian threat, but, toward the end, look ahead to a time of exile.

The second section, chapters 40-66, is set during the period of the exile in Babylon. Thousands of Jews from Jerusalem and the surrounding area had been moved a thousand miles from home. With seemingly no hope of returning after the burning of Jerusalem, the temple, and the ark of the covenant, the Jews sought to build new homes in their "prison," believing that their exile was punishment for their failure to trust God (e.g., v. 2 in today's reading). The later chapters of this section look ahead to the Jews' return to Judah and their continuing failure, but also speak to the glorious fulfillment of God's promise to restore all of creation.

Most scholars believe that the book of Isaiah is the work of at least two authors. Most believe that the prophet Isaiah wrote 1-39, but that 40-66 were written by another prophet, whom we might call "Second Isaiah."

I'm persuaded that chapters 40-66 are the work of an anonymous (at least to us) prophet working during the time of the exile. There are sound literary and historical reasons to believe this. But I am most drawn to the emotion of these chapters. In them I hear the voices of people who have lost everything and the voice of the God who speaks to them.

Next year, we're going to practice the art of spiritual reading. Reading Isaiah 40-66 one chapter at a time can be a good warm-up. Chew on these images. Read them in different translations. Try to imagine that you've lost everything – your home, your family, your church, your hopes, your dreams – and then hear these words brought to you by a prophet of God.

appreciated by those who acknowledge they really need some good news. So it is with God's Good News.

The opening verses of Isaiah 40 are beautiful, but they are most thrilling for those who desperately seek comfort. These words were written for the Jews living in exile. They had lost everything and they believed that this had happened because of their own failings. These are words of hope for people who had none. But we don't have to look that far back to appreciate these words. Whenever I come to Isaiah 40, I invariably recall a story I was once told by someone who should know.

In the early 60's, the Robert Shaw chorale was set to perform Handel's *Messiah*¹ in a large southern city, at a large all-white church. In the sanctuary, there were some seats set off to one side that were to be used by any black people who might want to attend. The entire sanctuary was full when it came time for the performance to begin.

After the orchestra finished its prelude, the tenor stepped forward to sing the opening aria. But he didn't stop at the usual spot on the stage. Instead the tenor walked across the sanctuary and stood in front of the "colored section." There, he began to sing, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God . . ."

I grew up in the deep South. I remember three restrooms in every grocery store – men, women, and colored; two water fountains; two waiting rooms at the doctor's office; the special section in the back of Shreveport's trolleys. To my shame, I remember that I was indifferent as a boy, blind to it all. It was simply the way things were. But looking back, I know that no one in that Atlanta sanctuary could have been unaffected by the tenor's enactment of God's words.

Good News is like that. It can hit us hard, open our eyes, move our hearts. And its arrival often catches us by surprise, like a bolt of cosmic lightning.

Cosmic lightning

God visits earth. That's the arrival for which we prepare during Advent. That's the Good News. Sure, the Jews had believed that God had been present with them, that the Holiest of Holies in the temple was the place heaven and earth met. But God hadn't been with them in this way – a small, screaming, sometimes smelly baby lying in some straw amidst a bunch of animals and shepherds. Who could ever conceive of such a thing? What does it say about God? About us?

God in a manger. God arriving to fulfill every promise God had ever made. God arriving to remake, restore, and renew his distorted creation. To make all things new, even you and me. It's bigger than Christmas. Even bigger than Easter. The arrival is as big as God himself.

¹ It is important to know that the libretto for *Messiah* consists solely of Scripture passages. *Messiah* opens with a tenor aria, set to today's reading from Isaiah 40: "Comfort ye my people."

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

December 3 ~ 9

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.
Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday 2 Peter; Isaiah 44 It is absurd to worship an idol of any kind. 44:9-20 is a wonderfully hilarious depiction of this absurdity.</p>	<p>Monday Habakkuk; Isaiah 45 Paul built his doctrine of “justification by faith” on the scriptural foundation of Habakkuk 2:4b (see Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11).</p>
<p>Tuesday Zephaniah; Isaiah 46 In the waning decades of Judah, Zephaniah brings warnings of the coming judgment, but also looks ahead to the day when all nations would be brought to the worship of the Lord.</p>	<p>Wednesday Jude; Isaiah 47 Jude was believed to be a half-brother of Jesus. The letter warns about the dangers of some new teachings that have made their way into the church.</p>
<p>Thursday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Friday Haggai; Isaiah 48 Haggai was a prophet during the time of the return from exile in Babylon. He warns that until the temple is rebuilt, normal living will be impossible.</p>
<p>Saturday Zechariah 1-3; Isaiah 50 Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. This book’s extensive symbolism makes it one of the more difficult biblical books to read. A study Bible will help, but the interpretation of Zechariah calls on our humility!</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

December Book Recommendation

Eat This Book, by Eugene Peterson

It is good to read the Bible, but the way we read it is just as important. Peterson guides us forward in the art of spiritual reading. The book's title is taken from three biblical passages in which a prophet is told eat God's Word (Revelation 10:9-10; Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 2:8-3:30). They are not just to read or hear God's Word, or just understand it, or even just apply it. These people are to eat Scripture, to take it inside themselves so it gets into every part of their person and being. Beginning in January, I invite you to begin growling over Scripture with me, learning to read with our hearts as well as our heads. We'll go through selected books, reading one story or one key passage each day. It is my hope that we'll learn how to ingest the story and keep it with us throughout the day, living with God's Word and letting it work within us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin today by sharing stories from your own experience of occasions when good news came to you in bleak times. How did it make you feel? Just how good did it seem? You might imagine that you were one of the Jews ripped from everything you knew and loved, only to be dropped a thousand miles from home with no hope of returning. How might have you reacted to today's reading from Isaiah? Would it be worse if you believed this happened because of something you or your family or your extended family had done? The exiled Jews saw their exile as punishment for (1) distrusting God, (2) chasing after false idols of various sorts, and (3) abandoning social justice. Does this understanding help you to read these verses in a different light? How do they hit your heart?
2. God visits earth . . . in a manger. What does this tell us about God? You might make a list of personal qualities or attributes that are revealed by God's decision to take on full humanity - even that small, screaming, smelly baby. How do you react to my description of baby Jesus as sometimes "smelly?" Do you want to imagine that Jesus never needed diapers? In what ways do we go about trying to sanitize Jesus? Why is it important that we don't?