

The First Sunday of Advent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 11.29.20

Isaiah 64: 1-9, Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18, 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9, Matthew 13: 24-27

Today we begin the season of Advent, something the church has done for centuries. Advent is the season of preparation for the coming once again of the Messiah into our lives. It is easy for the season to get lost in the other preparation that begins after Thanksgiving, the preparation for Christmas, with decorations, cards, parties, carols, trees, present purchases, wrapping, mailing, baking and all the rest. This year with the limitations of the transmission of COVID, the preparation for Christmas will be a bit different. More will be on-line and virtual, with fewer gatherings and less celebration. It would be easy to despair, we are getting weary of this way we must live.

And so, comes another Advent season a season of preparation of a different nature and one which asks us to slow down rather than gear up, one that offers us an opportunity to be reflective of what this time may mean for us and for what God has in mind and in store for God's people.

God is without a doubt a God of surprise. Just when we think we understand and have a "handle" on things, God pitches a curve ball. Not the pandemic, that is not of God. But the resources we have to deal with it, personally, as a community and in a spiritual manner, that is God's gift to us in this time.

During Advent, for the first three Sundays, the Hebrew Scripture, what we know as the Old Testament offers readings from the Prophet Isaiah. There are actually many authors under the heading of Isaiah. The scripture scholars, in their wisdom, have divided the writings into three parts for convenience. Not un-naturally, they are designated First, Second and Third Isaiah. When reading scripture, historical and spiritual context is vital to understanding what is being said. God is outside and beyond time as we know it. But, God engages us within our own context, within our own historical experience. It is what makes prophecy written centuries ago, valuable to us in this day. The prophets spoke in both concrete reality and in metaphor. For us, the value of the prophets is in the parallels of history between the people of Israel to whom Isaiah spoke and our own experience and lives in the early 21st century. It is a paradox that something so old can have such relevance centuries later. But, of course paradox is what makes life interesting. It is in the metaphors that we can see how what happened so long ago can be applied to our understanding of what is happening to us now.

Prophecy itself is a bit of a paradox. It deals with concrete life events, clearly offering a prediction of the future, which often turns out to be inexact. But prophecy is never intended to be fortune telling, or a knowledge of events before they happen. That is magic. Prophecy has always been rooted in the actual situation as the prophet found it. At the same time, prophecy is the poetic and imaginative narration of possibility. Prophecy is always about recalling the people of God to faith and to the core of their being. It is about repentance and a change in direction to realign with the will of God for humanity. It is in the imaginative and poetic narration of possibility that we can in our age find the truth of the prophets' words.

A brief aside to outline the world of Isaiah. The people of the kingdom of Judah had been conquered by a stronger military power. They had been taken into exile, Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed, their way of life drastically changed. They were desolate, feeling abandoned by God in whom they had placed their faith and trust. There seemed to be no hope. So wrote the prophet designated 1st Isaiah.

But, over time, the world situation changed. The power that had defeated Judah was itself defeated by a stronger power. Suddenly there was hope. The new conqueror had a policy of returning subject people to their homeland and allowing them to re-establish their traditions and their religious practices. People were given a choice to stay in exile where they had prospered or to return and rebuild the homeland. It was a time of hope, of energy and of renewal. So wrote the prophet known as 2nd Isaiah.

And so a group returned and began to rebuild. Things did not go well. The situation and along with it the hope, energy and commitment began to deteriorate. The people fought with each other and each group had an answer and would not listen to any other. There was drought, hunger, crop failure and inflation in the land. The bright future suddenly was ravaged by discord and inner-community conflict. There was bitter vindictiveness and a spirit of hopelessness. What had been the vision for a new future declined into partisan camps.

The theological challenge for the people of Jerusalem and for us this day is the same. It is the challenge of how God's word can be found in the conflict and dissonance between disparate groups of people who are convinced of the rightness of their cause. It is the challenge of whether we can recapture as a people the willingness to live by God's commandments. They are simple really, love God, love neighbor. When we do, we find that we are in fact loving ourselves as well. The world heals when we can put others first and that healing is a benefit for everyone.

And so, we come the Advent 2020, a time of some parallel with the time of Isaiah. The message is heard not in the specifics but in the metaphor and the possibility offered. This is our time of preparation for what is to come. Preparation of our hearts and minds to once again receive the blessing of the Messiah. It talks preparation, a sweeping out of old and corroded attitudes, a discarding of all that separates us from God and from one another. It is unlikely that the four short weeks of Advent will see a complete change, but the time to begin is now, and the change begins with each one of us. As we change we can reach out to those around us in love and support in new ways. In doing so, we are preparing a place in our hearts, our souls and most importantly in our lives for the coming of Jesus.

God is a God of surprises. Who would have guessed that the prophet Isaiah would have much to teach us in the modern world? It is proved yet again that much as things change, they also stay the same.

And so I leave you with the words of Isaiah written so long ago and so true today.

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.”