



Daily Devotionals February 4-9, 2019

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 1 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Judy Aronow, Janice Bachardy, Pat Gillory, Frances McMaster, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T. Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT EPIPHANY 4:

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Bending History

Monday, February 4, 2019

Isaiah 51:17-23

"See, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; you shall drink no more from the bowl of my wrath. And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, 'Bow down, that we may walk on you'; and you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to walk on." - vv. 22b-23

When I am downhearted and feeling oppressed, my spirit often finds release in song; the rhythmic thoughts and emotions, sometimes set to music and sometimes not, bring my heart ease. This poetic prophet, known as Deutero-Isaiah or Isaiah 2, although his true name is unknown, lyrically offers hope and rejuvenation, not only to himself, but also to his fellow Jews, exiled in Babylonian captivity.

Dragged from Jerusalem into exile, the Jews endured brutal oppression from 597-539BCE, to the point of complete disorientation as if they were drunk ("cup of staggering"). Isaiah 2 proclaims that the oppression is nearing an end, YHWH has not forsaken them and is preparing the same fate for the oppressors after the Jews return to their homeland.

Part of that disorientation is attributable to the feeling the exiles had that YHWH either had forsaken them or had been defeated by the Babylonian pantheon of gods. In the midst of pain and trouble, it's hard to see the big picture, but Isaiah 2 lifts up the heads of his fellow exiles, asserting that YHWH is present in their lives and in control of the events that take place in the story on earth, bending history to his purpose. This is the lesson for us today: Humans are not in control even though we have free will and choice. Our God works all things together for good to those who love him.

Grasping Symbols

Tuesday, February 5, 2019

Isaiah 52:1-12

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says Zion, 'Your God reigns'." - v. 7

The early church father Jerome refers to The Book of Isaiah as "the fifth gospel" because in Isaiah the story of the Messiah is told in such a way as to make the reader think he is "telling the story of what has already happened rather than what is still to come." The Book of Isaiah is the most quoted Old Testament text other than Psalms, and many key symbols of Christianity flow from Isaiah passages. The verse above not only applies to Isaiah himself, but also alludes to John the Baptizer and to Jesus Christ himself. The beauty and complexity of prophetic language often requires "unpacking" to understand more clearly. I hear a version of this verse in every liturgy, and listeners are assumed to grasp the accepted symbols.

"[T]he mountains" bring to mind high places near to heavenly enlightenment and Moses talking face-to-face with YHWH, so our symbolic connection is that this messenger brings God's word of truth. The "messenger" implies the message is from someone else, in this case, God. Use of the positive verb "announces" leaves no doubt in the listener's mind that what is being announced is coming to pass.

The four items the messenger announces:

- peace
- good news
- salvation
- and the message "Your God reigns"

are synonymous, whether to exiles in Babylon or those lost in sin or those who have not found the hope of Christ today. Rephrased in a New Testament context, Jesus Christ (messenger) brings a message of reconciliation (peace) from our all-powerful Father (who reigns), revealing the gospel Message (good news) of how to be cleansed of our sins (salvation). Much is said in these few words.

Sawyer, John F.A. "Isaiah." The Oxford Illustrated Companion to the Bible. New York: Tess Press, an imprint of Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc., 2003. 115-118.

Let's Call You Judah

Wednesday, February 6, 2019

Isaiah 54:1-17

"But your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called." v. 5

Put yourself in the shoes of a man or woman, born to exiled Israelites in the magnificent city of Babylon. Let's call you Judah. Judah's parents told you of the invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the pillage of the treasures that King Solomon had dedicated to the Temple, and the horrors and humiliations of living like slaves in a foreign land. Considering the history of the Jews living in Jerusalem before the invasion, it's most likely your parents were Jews in name only, worshipping pagan deities absorbed from the Canaanite peoples who surrounded them. However, Jewish tradition told of The One God, YHWH, whose people they were, and traditions and the stories of their glorious past were important elements in maintaining a Jewish identity in the midst of a conquering nation.

Babylon had 100s of gods and goddesses, temples on every street corner, and 1000s of temple priests and priestesses who lived on the bounty brought by the worshippers as well as numerous parades and festivals honoring this pantheon. Certainly Babylonians scoffed at the God of the Jews: He couldn't save them from invasion and being dragged into exile as a conquered people.

Out in the streets, Judah might gather round to hear a prophet speak. This prophet, Isaiah 2, offered hope to you, asserting that the god of the Jews is "the god of the whole earth" and the days of exile and humiliation were coming to an end. "The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer" had special meaning to Judah: He understood that the Redeemer (*go'el*) was the nearest kinsman pledged to rescue a family member out of trouble, a common Jewish practice as seen in the Old Testament story of Ruth and Boaz.

Hope is a mobilizing and motivating concept. And the assertion that YHWH is the God of all of the earth trumps the Babylonian cacophony of their myriad of gods and goddesses...a liberating statement, removing

some of the pain of subjugation. The cosmic assertion above was truly a new and radical idea to Judah, but one that would turn his face towards a return to Jerusalem and an eventual return to a Jewish religion.

Trust Though the Outcome is Unknown

Thursday, February 7, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-13

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." - vv. 8-9

Skip ahead now in the chronology of The Book of Isaiah. Perhaps this is the same writer but maybe not. The message and tone of this chapter is much different: Instead of holding out hope to an oppressed people, the prophet speaks to a bewildered people who have returned from Babylon to a destroyed and ransacked city that has "moved on" from when they were captured, and their old homes and workplaces are no more. They must struggle to rebuild their lives.

In their shoes, I would be wondering why, why did this happen to us? Through the words of the prophet, we are told that we cannot comprehend the actions or thoughts of God. This is a departure from the pagan gods the Israelite captives had been surrounded with in Babylon; those gods reflected human patterns and desires, and their worship involved gifts of a very human nature.

Worship of YHWH required trust in his will, even though the outcome was unknown. We are little different today. I often begin a long novel and "peek" at the last pages to see if a character makes it through. We want to know if there's a happy ending before we buy those movie tickets. We take out every kind of insurance possible. We live our lives in ignorance of how those lives will change over time, where the road will take us, and what good or ill may befall us. We cannot know.

But God stands outside of time; to God there is no past, or present, or future...only now. When he sees the arc of my life or the arc of history, he sees it all. Just as the returned exiles had to learn to trust YHWH, so must we, for his thoughts and ways are "higher" than ours.

Towards YHWH

Friday, February 8, 2019

Isaiah 56:1-8

"And the foreigners who joined themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and I will make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings will be accepted on my altar for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." - vv. 6-7

In my immature and very black & white days of (mis)understanding the Bible, I saw the ancient world as Jews and non-Jews. Period. The Jews were God's Chosen People, and the rest were just out of luck. And yet, this verse, and others like it, were here all the time! God chose the Jews through which to bless humanity with our Savior Jesus Christ, but outsiders had the option to choose God as their deity, and obviously many did.

Father Abraham pleased God by his obedience: Abram chose God and God chose Abraham as the start of a bloodline through which he could prepare humanity to be reconciled to him, after our disgrace in the Garden. Even in Genesis, however, upright men not of Abraham's line are alluded to, such as Melchizedek. Others, such as the Canaanite woman Rahab, become part of the Jewish nation and heritage by choosing to help the Jews.

As the exiled Jews returned to Jerusalem, many chose to seek their Jewish traditions and return to the worship of YHWH, and evidently, many non-Jews chose this as well, rejecting the rampant paganism of the day. This period of Restoration saw the rebuilding of a Jerusalem, its wall and the Temple, and a rebuilding of the Jewish faith. After so many generations of intermarrying with the surrounding Canaanite peoples,

those strong bonds could not help but pull those people towards the worship of YHWH. So, it's a matter of human choice, not just an accident of birth that pulls people toward God. Isaiah 2 prophesies that "all people" will be welcomed in God's house of prayer.

Our No-Gods

Saturday, February 9, 2019

Isaiah 57:3-13

*"Who talked you into the pursuit of this nonsense,
leaving me high and dry,
forgetting you ever knew me?
Because I don't yell and make a scene
do you think I don't exist?
I'll go over, detail by detail, all your 'righteous' attempts at religion,
and expose the absurdity of it all.
Go ahead, cry for help to your collective of no-gods:
A good wind will blow them away.
They're smoke, nothing but smoke." -vv. 11-13 The Message*

The tone of the prophet Isaiah (3), as Eugene Peterson translated it, is righteous indignation at the ridiculous return to pagan worship and idolatry the Jews indulged in after their return from Babylon. Even as the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was proceeding apace, Jews were revisiting the high places dedicated to idols, forgetting YHWH who brought them out of exile. How short is our memory!

Our no-gods will also blow away in smoke when true disaster strikes, leaving us face-to-face with the eternal and everlasting God who loves us. Riches, money, security, good health, all the blessings life can afford can also become our idols, and all will blow away in the face of eternity. Jesus sums it up succinctly: Love the Lord your God with all your soul, spirit, mind, and body, and love your neighbor as yourself.

*"But anyone who runs to me for help
will inherit the land,
will end up owning my holy mountain!"*

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