

Building Up the Ancient Ruins

Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 1:46-55

Advent 3 B

We spend more time with Isaiah during Advent than at any other time of the year. The prophet Isaiah must have been Jesus' own favorite prophet out of his Hebrew scriptures, and Isaiah seems to have influenced the authors of the four gospels more than any other Old Testament book. Part of today's portion from Isaiah was used by Jesus when he gave his first sermon at the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus seems to have identified with Isaiah the prophet. Jesus not only quotes Isaiah but uses the already ancient words to define his ministry:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord...

As you know, Isaiah is really two distinct messages from two distinct time periods almost 200 years apart. The first and oldest is a message of warning to God's people of Judah that their broken society indicates a broken relationship with their God, and if they don't repent, they will

end up conquered, the temple in Jerusalem destroyed, and the population sent into exile. The first Isaiah says “beware.” That’s the first message from the eighth century B.C.

The second part, beginning with chapter 40 read last Sunday, was written generations after the prophesied conquering and exile, in the sixth century B.C. The exiled and demoralized people of Judah lived in faraway Babylon with fading memories of Jerusalem, and now the second Isaiah prophesies that Cyrus, King of Persia, will conquer the conquerors and allow the Jews to return to their Promised Land. The second Isaiah offers comfort, speaking tenderly to the heart of exiled Jerusalem.

That’s the portion of Isaiah that encompasses today’s reading, and that’s the Isaiah that Jesus identifies with so closely. It’s a comforting message of hope to people who live in a far off land. It’s a comforting promise that the ancient ruins will be rebuilt. It’s a comforting vision that the new Jerusalem will surpass Solomon’s old city in beauty, peace and joy. It’s a challenging reminder to God’s people that being God’s people, being chosen, is not just a privilege. It is also a great responsibility. It means living together with peace and justice, treating one another as children of God, and taking care of one another. This

idea connects the first and second Isaiah, and may explain why the two books wound up as one.

We might say that John the Baptist preached the warning side of the prophet's message, from the first Isaiah, and Jesus preached the comfort side, from the second. That's a good way to look at it, I think, since so many preachers these days seem to wag their fingers at the world and act like Jesus is more about doomsday warning than saving grace. A distinctive message from our St Paul's tradition is that we believe that Jesus did not major in rejecting people, and thus, neither do we. That is why we try to be an inclusive community, emphasizing the height, depth and breadth of God's love. Ours is a big tent, a comforting shelter that spreads widely over many different people. It's not just birds of a feather flocking together. Some of us are pretty strange birds. We are diverse, and in our diversity we find strength and unity. It is not our sameness that makes us one, but it is the center point, the anchor, the magnet of Jesus Christ who holds us together inside that big tent.

As we get closer to Christmas, we need to reflect a bit on what we are getting ready for. Besides keeping up with the Joneses, why is it that we are decorating and baking and partying and shopping and buying and wrapping and hosting and traveling? When someone warns us to

remember the reason for the season, what does that mean? Christmas is Jesus' birthday, yes, but which of the variations on who Jesus is and what his message is about are we going to celebrate?

I have been thinking lately about the innocent children who have been victimized by the bad apple coach or priest. This is such a tragedy, and as we approach Christmas, I can't help but think about the slaughter of the innocents that Matthew says Herod ordered when the Magi tipped him off that Messiah had been born right under his nose. I can't help but think about how Jesus, as child and as adult, took on our sin and became one of us in order to deliver us.

When we admire the little child, we see in him or her purity, innocence, enormous and yet unrealized potential. Will this child become prince or pauper, head of state or homeless, victor or victim, Christ or criminal?

The *Carol of the Magi* by John Rutter puts these words in the mouth of the wisemen who came to worship the Christchild: As you hear these words, think about the innocent, victimized children in whose faces we might see Jesus, and think about how in Jesus, we see the faces of such children, even today:

We rode all night through fields of darkness,
Our guiding light the Eastern star;
We came to Bethlehem, we all were weary:

We'd travelled far that night, we'd travelled far.

We heard that here we'd find Messiah,
Foretold by seers from days of old;
We looked for palaces: and found a stable.
Could it be here, so bare and cold...?

We entered in and there we saw him;
It seemed we'd known him from long before
A child like any child, yet somehow different.
The face of every child in him we saw...

We'd brought him gifts, and now we offered them;
We knelt down low in silent prayer.
With eyes that seemed to know both joy and sadness
The child looked down as we knelt there...

So long ago, yet I remember
That child who lay at Mary's knee;
How strange that every child seems so much like him.
His is the face I seem to see.

I recall taking a food pantry delivery to a home one Christmas Eve morning. The living room of the small apartment was full of family. I felt awkward and wanted to just hand over the grocery bags and leave. But a grandmother or great aunt stopped me and said, you must see something first before you go. The small crowd of people parted like the Red Sea and up from the sofa came a young mother, perhaps too young to be a mother, I thought. And in her arms was a tiny bundle, just a few days old, a firstborn child, I was told. Now I don't remember if it was a boy or girl, but I do recall how someone took the bags of groceries from my arms and replaced them with that child. A poor child, born into a family of very limited means, a child whose paternity may well have been questionable, and I looked into that little face and saw Jesus. "A child like any child but somehow different."

"How strange that every child seems so much like him. His is the face I seem to see."

I held that baby and began to weep. I passed the infant back to the mother and said, "Thank you. Merry Christmas." Then I hurried out the door. Pathetic words. What do you say when you have held Messiah in your arms? I came bearing the small gift of some canned goods and came away touched by an angel, blessed beyond imagining, jolted by a

small black face that seemed more Jesus than any I had seen before or have seen since. "So long ago, yet I remember." The greatest of gifts.

I did not go to that poor home that day with any inkling at all about what I would find. I was just the delivery boy for our church. But I came away reminded of that greatest of gifts from God to the world, and the holy mystery of which came first, the innocence of the newborn child into which God poured incarnation or the incarnation which forever redeemed newborn life? It doesn't matter which came first. They are now and forever intertwined. God bless the children, the innocents and the victimized in whom we see Jesus' face. May we see and remember them in the face of Jesus, at this birth and always.

So long ago, yet I remember

That child who lay at Mary's knee;

How strange that every child seems so much like him.

His is the face I seem to see.