

Well, 'tis the Fourth Sunday of Advent. The climax of our preparations is almost here, but of course, this year we are still a week away from the celebration of Christ's first coming in the Incarnation. Yet the anticipation of Christmas is palpable. We are closer than we were even yesterday to our celebrations, but we have not yet passed through that last door, on the other side of which we can say, "He is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

The readings this morning march us ever closer to these celebrations. They take us on a narrative history of the promise given to the people of Israel of the Messiah that was to come – Whom we, as Christians, know has indeed come in the person of Jesus Christ. In all of these passages – really we might generalize this to the entire Bible and even to the entire experience of humanity – there is a longing that the world would be put right. In our Christian faith, we understand how this is to happen, but we must still wrestle with the fact that it hasn't completely come to fruition. We still are shackled with the sorrow and struggle of this life, and we must therefore press forward daily into the sorrows of the world through faith in Our Lord, Jesus Christ. The world is broken and we are needy, but we live confidently knowing that God is using us in Christ to remake the world.

Let us begin our survey of this morning's readings with Psalm 80. Like so many of the Psalms, we don't know the exact provenance of its writing, but there are some clues to suggest a plausible context. Verses 1 and 2 read:

HEAR, O thou Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; * show thyself also, thou that sittest upon the Cherubim. Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, * stir up thy strength, and come and help us.

In verse 1, we have a reference to Joseph. Then in verse 2, we have references to Ephraim and Manasseh. These two were the children of Joseph, and if you recall in Genesis chapter 48, they were adopted as sons by Jacob, who is also called Israel. He elevated them, in honor of Joseph, to be his own sons instead of grandsons. Benjamin was the only son of Jacob's that was younger than Joseph and the mother of both was Rachel. Both Joseph and Benjamin were favorites of Jacob so their inclusion in this Psalm appeals to the affection between God and his people. Some have also suggested that the exclusion of Judah, the lone tribe in the south, means that the context for the Psalm is the Assyrian invasion of the northern 10 tribes around 725 BC. These tribes are in this Psalm crying out for help to God. The plea is made right at the beginning, and the psalmist calls upon God to honor his covenantal bond to his people. Notice the imagery of a shepherd leading his flock that is employed in this plea. *We are your flock, O God. You are our Shepherd. You reside in the heavens, but we need you here now. Stir up thy strength and come and help us.*"

Here we see their desperation as they are calling out to God, but this people had not been following their Shepherd. At this point in their history, God's long-suffering had been exhausted, God did not save them, and the Assyrians did lead Israel off to captivity.

And yet during this same period in Israel's history, The prophet Isaiah is active in both the north and in the southern tribes of Judah. So in the midst of the defeat of Israel in the North, we have the prophecy of Isaiah 40 which is explicitly directed to Judah and to its capital, Jerusalem. If you recall, after the defeat of Israel, Assyria continued toward the south with the intent of conquering Judah.

Hezekiah calls to Isaiah who delivers the message of chapter 40.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

Some things to note here. First, the message is one of pardon and peace. Comfort ye my people; I forgive your sins, for which you have suffered, and I will end your strife. I am coming; listen to the voice in the wilderness. Your lives last but a moment, yet I am eternal; my Word lasts forever and shall not fail. I am strong, I can accomplish what I say. I am your shepherd and will protect you. I will comfort you.” A great contrast here between the pleas for help in the psalm, which ultimately are unheeded, and this message of peace to the people of Judah. Yet the imagery is similar, particularly the shepherd imagery. Also the context is similar. In fact the invading country is Assyria in both passages. And both peoples are under duress. They are terrorized and have no hope of stopping the invaders on their own. God is their only hope. This is the real point here. In all honesty, we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. God must come and save us.

So how is it that we find the end of ourselves, that we realize our complete impotence? We only find our end when we are faced with struggles that we have no hope of overcoming by ourselves. In both of these passages, we should note the role that disobedience to God plays. Israel was idolatrous and had pursued evil for hundreds of years. Had God saved them, I suppose they would have continued on in their idolatrous ways, and therfor He was unmoved by their pleas. Judah, though far from perfect, had raised up some kings that feared and obeyed God. God listened to their pleas. Judah was not covenantally disowned at this point, and God forgave their sins: “her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”

So the plea for help in the Psalm can also be our plea in times of trouble. In the Old Testament lesson we have God's words of comfort to His people, words of promised rescue. Certainly these are words of comfort to us as well. But let us now turn to the Gospel lesson where we find a delegation of religious leaders from Jerusalem questioning John the Baptist. “Who are you? Why are you baptizing people if you are not the Messiah?” Now in John's response, the connection between the Isaiah passage and this Gospel reading is clear. Isaiah prophesied of a voice that would cry in the wilderness

to prepare the way of the Lord, and John the Baptist identifies himself with this voice. His job is one of preparation. His baptism is a baptism of repentance. He is confronting the people with their sins, and their hearts are responding in conviction. John did not have the gift of the Holy Spirit to give, for the sins of the people had yet to be put to death in Christ. But their hearts are being made ready. They are the way of the Lord that is being prepared. The intensification of the message in this passage is that John declares the imminence of Christ. “there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.” Christ, unrecognized by the crowd and concealed from the Sanhedrin’s lackeys, was even then possibly in their midst. Isaiah’s prophecy of deliverance of ancient Israel might have been fulfilled when the Assyrians were miraculously destroyed; but its ultimate fulfillment, the events that would change human history, events that would change the very nature of humanity, was happening even as John the Baptist spoke. Christ was there in their midst. The Messiah was come!

Now of course we know that the sap of the Edenic Tree of Life flowed through the cross upon which the Prince of Life hung. Jesus became incarnate, God became man, so that in Him we might die the death declared by God to humanity for disobedience. But He also came to recreate humanity, to gain for Himself a redeemed and holy people. In Christ’s first Advent, we have become new creatures. Old things are passed away, behold all things are new. But this new life is being lived out in the old package so to speak. We have not experienced our final resurrection associated with Christ’s second Advent. Why? Well, I’m not sure. That has to do with God’s timing, but my personal conviction is that the Bride is not yet ready. Not all of those who will be saved, have been saved. The Bride herself, the Church, is a bit of a mess right now (though has it ever been any different?). So we press on in faith knowing that our warfare, our fight with the damning power of Satan and with the corrupted nature of our souls, has been won, but the warfare with the world and our own flesh still rages. What does this battle look like?

It looks like this: “REJOICE in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Some important points here. First, we are commanded to rejoice, but note the focus of our rejoicing – we rejoice “in the Lord.” It does not mean that we should attempt to be irrationally happy. It means that we are convinced of the salvation won for us in Christ, and therefore it is in Christ that we can continue on with confidence and with optimism. Battles of all sorts will come our way, but in Christ, we know that our perseverance will finish in victory and bring us to greater holiness. Moderation here doesn’t refer necessarily to moderation in consumption, though that may be a part of it. Moderation refers to the conduct of one’s life. We are not to be given to extremes – the vagaries of life should not be the basis of our emotional well-being. In this, there is a sense of detachment from the world, but this is not a detachment from everything. It is a clinging on to Christ and seeing *that* attachment as superior and more precious than anything else. We can lose fortunes, we can lose friends, we can lose health, and we can lose homes. These are real and costly losses, but the ultimate loss is to lose Christ. Are we willing to hold on the Christ even if we lose everything else? What does

it take to bring a person to that point – where he knows that all things are in the hand of God so that he does not have to be anxious about holding on to those things that we consider to be basic necessities? Where He realizes that the only necessity is Jesus Christ? Instead of being anxious, being preoccupied, he lays his needs before God in prayer knowing that, through God's means and for God's purposes, all of our trials and struggles will be sorted out. This is not a passive resignation, for we are required to work out our faith. We are expected to engage with the world and do what we can. It is, however, handing over the results of our work to God. Do your best and leave it to God. What looks to us like failures and disasters, is used by God for higher purposes. Tell God what is on your mind, and in God's timing, He will sort it out as is best.

The imagery from both the Psalm and the Old Testament lesson this morning of a shepherd leading his flock is instructive. We are His people, and the sheep of His hand. Do the sheep understand where the good pastures are? No, they don't. In fact they may have to deal with some hunger as their shepherd leads them on to more verdant feeding grounds. They may be stubborn and not want to go if they do not trust the shepherd. But here, we must ask ourselves, “Is Christ close at hand? Will He hear our prayers and answer them? Does He care for us? Has He laid down His life for the sheep?” The answers ... Yes, yes, yes, and yes. “Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, ... He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

As we look toward the celebration of God's first coming, we are reminded that for us, He is already here. He provides everything we need – even in our foolishness, our grasping, our failures. He gave His life for us and has taken it up again so that we would know everlasting life too. Is this not worth rejoicing over this season? The Lord is at hand. He is even now with you, and may He remain with you always. AMEN.