**Watercourses in the Negev**

First let’s read Isaiah 61 on its own terms, in its own context. This part of the book is the Third Isaiah of which I spoke two weeks ago, that season in the history of the nation when Israel sojourned the long decline of the nation from Assyrian captivity in mid-8th century to the return from a Babylonian captivity 200 years later.

Here in the mid-sixth century, as our text for last week (Isaiah 40:1) put it with so much emotion: Comfort, O comfort my people, say your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid….

That is now in the past but never to be forgotten. We are unable to forget our pain. Our pain is part of us now. In an important way our suffering defines who we are. Our suffering is part of the clay of which our pot is made.

By the rivers of Babylon—  
    there we sat down and there we wept  
    when we remembered Zion. (Psalm 137:1)

For our text today, Isaiah 61:1-4, the speaker is Third Isaiah, who sees himself as the anointed. He is announcing the restoration of the temple destroyed by the Babylonians 70 years earlier. It is the great reversal of fortune.

From the exile in Babylon to the time of our text, finally, they are back home.

As our Psalm for the week celebrates this restoration to the homeland and it puts it so beautifully, Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb (Psalm 126:4).

And in Isaiah 61:1-4:

* It is said of these days that there is liberty for the captives,
* comfort for those who mourn.
* Instead of ashes there is a garland,
* instead of a faint spirit, a spirit of praise.
* the ancient ruins of the city will be raised up
* It is said that they will now become oaks of righteousness. Isn’t that the most beautiful imagery?

Yes, as he writes, all is still in ruins… but, they are home once more. It is the great reversal of fortune. Isaiah believes himself to be the Anointed and I don’t think he knew that another would someday come, or that he understood that this would come to be understood as proleptic of Christ, that is a representation of the future:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
    because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
    to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
    and release to the prisoners;  
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor…

Now we have our context in hand.

We learn in Luke 4 that 500 years later a young man, in his mid-twenties, stands before his home congregation. Often genius flares most brightly in the twenties you know.

This young man stands before his home synagogue with a cosmic vision so vast, so all encompassing, it boggles the mind.

The Gospel of John describes it this way: What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:3-5).

As Jesus rises to read the Scripture for the day in his home synagogue, he asks for the Isaiah scroll (do you see how ancient a practice we follow with our weekly readings?).

He read this very voice of Isaiah 61 and came to realize, that day? Another day? That “it’s me.”

The Spirit of God is upon me, the Lord has anointed me. I am the Lord’s anointed.

And Isaiah once stood on the doorstep of the great restoration of Jerusalem, so, 500 years later, as the one who again restores Israel and all the Gentiles.

Advent indeed. Can you see it? The Jesus stands before his synagogue as the Great Restorer of Righteousness to the World!

[Insert picture of the Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.]

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Seventeen vellum sheets, stitched together, 24 ft long. Discovered in Cave Four at Qumran, from the very time of Jesus, the only scroll that survived in its entirety. I’ve been to Cave Four. They never destroyed old copies of scripture, they retired them to storage.

This scroll is thought to date from c 125 BCE. So it was probably in use in some synagogue while Jesus walked the earth.

Sidebar: Phyllis Tickle, one of the prophets of the Emergent Movement, also Brian McLaren [I’m not an adherent of the Emergent Movement], has noticed rather famously, that every 500 years there is a “rummage sale” in Judeo-Christendom.

* The pinnacle of Israelite monarchy 1000 BCE
* The great restoration of Jerusalem under Zerubbabel – 500 years later
* The appearance of Jesus – 500 years later
* The fall of the Roman Empire – 500 years later
* The Great Schism between western Catholic Christianity and Orthodox Christianity in the east at 1000 – 500 years later
* The Reformation of Martin Luther – 500 years later
* And today…. Well that was 1517, 500 years later, the world seems to be again entering a new epoch. What will Christianity do now?
* You see… this is of no small importance to a congregation like ours that seeks to position itself for the next 50 years of service to God in Victoria. We are going to do it. We will not allow us to become irrelevant to our city.
* As the parable of the bridesmaids says, Keep Awake!

From the Text

How does this message from Isaiah 61, and its quotation by Jesus, all relate to Advent?

Advent is so textured and profound. I have two points of application this morning.

1. Advent is a time of repentance and preparation. A solemn time.

It is meaningful that Isaiah 58-60, just prior to our passage, are about God’s call to His people for repentance. They outwardly appear righteous. They seem to themselves righteous. They are quite pleased with themselves for their fasts, their ostensible humility, their proper worship (Isa 58:1-9).

But God says do I want your false humility, your fasts, you proper form?

…share your bread with the hungry,  
    and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
    and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

From our humility and repentance flows care for our fellow human beings.

Can you see how Jesus’ message as the anointed one, his entire life, echoes, in all ways, the path of this great restoration from the time of Third Isaiah? God’s ways don’t change. The imperatives of the redeemed life are real and actually mundane. Take care of your neighbor and love God. That is the heart of the Mystery of Love.

2. But also a time of Hope.

A harbinger is something or some person who foreshadows a future event, just like from the Isaiah 40/Mark 1 passage from last week, John was a harbinger of Jesus. Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight his paths! (Isa 40

Advent is a harbinger for the Great Restoration. The advent of the Messiah.

Today can be the Great Restoration for you. Life lies behind us like some metaphorical journey of Israel through history. Like her, we too have perhaps been overrun by life or conquered or cast from your home, set adrift in a wilderness to serve another nation, another god.

But even if you are young, even teens and in the twenties we are astonished at how quickly life can become very difficult and unmanageable; seemingly hopeless.

This promise of Christ, this great restoration of God’s equilibrium to the world means that it is available in every moment of history from that day forward; up to and including this very moment.

It is made possible by the resurrection of this Messiah from the dead.

It is this hope, this peace, this mystery that we celebrate. And still we wait, but in the phrase made famous by Tony Compolo, Sunday’s a comin!

Thanks be to God