

“The Soul Felt Its Worth”

*Isaiah 9:1–2, 6-7; Isaiah 40:1–11; Isaiah 52:7–10;
Mark 1:1–8*

The true story

God speaks to us across the ages with words of warning and hope, of caution and salvation.

Beginning with the prophet Amos and continuing more than five centuries to Malachi, these words were written down, collected, edited, and then

copied as they passed from generation. So, they come to us now, shaping our understanding of our times and, most importantly, helping to form the truth of Jesus and God’s great rescue plan. For example, the great scroll of Isaiah has shaped our understanding of Jesus more than any other OT writing. Indeed, it is the scroll from which Jesus read when he began his public ministry.

For two millennia, the scroll of Isaiah has been enormously influential in shaping Christian theology. And as with the entire biblical library, today’s passages from Isaiah will be much more meaningful to us if we put them in some context. However, it is very likely that Isaiah of 700 BC did not write the entire book that you and I know as the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called “First Isaiah,” chapters 1-39, was written by the prophet Isaiah more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Isaiah warns the people of Judah that the same ruin will befall them unless they turn back to God. Judah’s fall is not immediate. Nonetheless, Jerusalem burned to the ground about 150 years later at the hands of the Babylonians.

There are passages of hope in “first Isaiah” in addition to the words of warning. Some of Isaiah’s messages look ahead to a time when all of God’s people would be restored under God’s rule. The prophet looked ahead to the coming of God’s kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the exile, after the Babylonians overran the kingdom and burned Jerusalem and the temple in 587BC. It is hard to overstate the darkness of the exile. In the midst of the Jews’ crushing pain and despair, another prophet, writing in the name of the great prophet Isaiah, brought the Jews comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God’s rule. And the Jewish community heard in these words the sacred and inspired word of God. These were tangible promises of hope and restoration brought in a time of utter darkness when all seemed lost. And these writings were taken by the Jewish community as sacred and inspired.

Thus, the reference to the “ruins of Jerusalem” in 52:9 above is concrete, speaking of a realized horror. The Jews looked forward to the day when God would come to their rescue, when he would “bare his holy arm.” On that day, God would roll up his sleeves and get to work. All the world would see that God is God. Can we even imagine a bigger day!

Thus, the prophet uses an image of lookouts posted on mountains. The lookouts are to signal the instant that God appears on the horizon. God is riding to rescue not only his people, but all the world. “The ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” The fact that passages from Isaiah such as this one from chapter 52 were written during the exile makes them immeasurably more real and meaningful to me.

Isaiah uses the image of the Lord baring his arm for all the world to see. Though Isaiah surely means this as an image of power, in a Christmas sermon N.T. Wright sees something more in the bare arm:



“But see the arm of the Lord stretched out, bare and helpless, in the manger; listen to the word made flesh, gaze upon the incarnate glory, fill your mind with wisdom in person -- and suddenly the language of adoration makes a whole lot of sense. . . . And our innate desire to see the world put to rights kindles again to a passion when we realize that:

‘This little Babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak, unarmed wise,
The gates of hell he will surprise.’

[from Robert Southwell’s poem, “New Heaven, New War”]

He reaches out his naked arms towards the world with love and power; and shall we not adore him? Shall we not join in his work in the world? Shall we not in turn find ourselves caught up, as we receive him and believe in his name, in ourselves becoming children of God, charged with the same mission of peace and mercy and reconciliation? Shall we not greet him this day as we meet him, and bless as we understand, on this Christ's Mass of all days? Shall we not give him glory? Shall we not come and adore him? ‘The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.’”

And these stirring words bring us to Advent, for God is on the horizon, striding into view, incarnate and born to a very young Galilean woman.

Advent

“Advent” comes from the Latin, *advenire*, meaning “arrival.” The advent season is a time of preparation for an arrival. But of what . . . or of whom?

It is easy to see Advent as a time of preparation for, well . . . Christmas morning. Shopping, food, trees, parties, decorations, and all the rest. Sometimes it seems almost overwhelming, crowding out anything resembling a Lenten time of preparation.

But when we step back for a moment, we remember that Christmas is actually about Jesus. So, in a way we’d be right to see the “arrival” as the birth of the baby Jesus. But we’d still be falling short of the larger story.

How Good is the News?

The light seems brightest when we step out of a dark room. The thrill of victory is made sweeter by the agony of defeat. I could go on piling up clichés, for we all know that Good News is better appreciated by those who acknowledge they really need some good news. So it is with God’s Good News.

The opening verses of Isaiah 40 are beautiful, but they are most thrilling for those who desperately seek comfort. These words were written for the Jews living in exile. They had lost everything and they believed that this had happened because of their own failings. These are words of hope for people who had none. But we don’t have to look that far back to appreciate these words. Whenever I come to Isaiah 40, I invariably recall a story I was once told by someone who should know.

In the early 60’s, the Robert Shaw chorale was set to perform Handel’s *Messiah*¹ in a large southern city, at a large all-white church. In the sanctuary, there were some seats set off to one side that were to be used by any black people who might want to attend. The entire sanctuary was full when it came time for the performance to begin.

After the orchestra finished its prelude, the tenor stepped forward to sing the opening aria. But he didn’t stop at the usual spot on the stage. Instead, the tenor walked across the sanctuary and stood in front of the

¹It is important to know that the libretto for *Messiah* consists solely of Scripture passages. *Messiah* opens with a tenor aria, set to today’s reading from Isaiah 40: “Comfort ye my people.”

“colored section.” There, he began to sing, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God” For Charles Jennens had chosen the opening verses of Isaiah 40 to begin his libretto, *Messiah*, set to music by George Frideric Handel, and first performed in Dublin on April 13, 1742.

Three restrooms in every store – men, women, and colored; two water fountains; two waiting rooms at the doctor’s office; the special section in the back of the bus....do we remember? Or are we inndifferent, blind to it all. It was simply the way things were. But looking back, I know that no one in that Atlanta sanctuary could have been unaffected by the tenor’s enactment of God’s words.

Good News is like that. It can hit us hard, open our eyes, move our hearts. And its arrival often catches us by surprise, like a bolt of lightning. Much as did the arrival of John the Baptizer at the Jordan.

John the Baptizer

Mark, the evangelist, was a consummate storyteller and prepares the reader for what lies ahead. He gives away the ending at the beginning! We are about to hear the Good News of Jesus the Messiah (“Christ” is simply the Greek word for “Messiah”). Most of the characters in Mark’s drama won’t understand that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, but we are told right up front. To make sure we “get it,” Mark then quotes Isaiah’s promise of one who would “prepare the way of the Lord.”

With the words of Isaiah 40 ringing in our ears, we then meet John the baptizer, who is gathering together all the lost in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance. It is as if he says, “Turn away from your wanderings! Look. The Lord is coming!” Dressed like the prophet Elijah,² John points the crowds to someone who is even more powerful, who will baptize, not with water like John, but with the Holy Spirit. The crowds don’t know that it is Jesus to whom John points, but we, the listeners do, thanks to Mark’s beginning. Though no one other than Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him, we see it. Only we and Jesus hear God’s call to his beloved Son.

Are we prepared for the truth?

It is striking to me that Mark’s prologue prepares us for Jesus’ public ministry but not for his crucifixion. Mark tells us right up front that Jesus is the God’s Messiah and Son. Thus, we aren’t surprised when Jesus performs miracles or restores life or casts out demons. But nothing here prepares us for Jesus’ humiliating and lonely death. It is as if Jesus’ entire 2½ year journey begins and ends in the wilderness. It is God’s Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (v. 12) and it is God who saves Jesus from the wilderness of his crucifixion by raising him from the dead, pushing him forward into new life.

Thus it is with us. We live in a wilderness that is too often of our own creation. Yet, Jesus meets us there. In him, we are reborn. We are strengthened and renewed. The world may still be a wilderness filled with temptations to turn away from God, but we are prepared so that, by the power of Christ, we can face life’s temptations and trials yet remain a faithful people.

Cosmic lightning

God visits earth. That’s the arrival for which we prepare during Advent. That’s the Good News. Sure, the Jews had believed that God had been present with them, that the Holiest of Holies in the temple was the place heaven and earth met. But God hadn’t been with them in this way – a small, screaming, sometimes smelly baby lying in some straw amidst a bunch of animals and shepherds. Who could ever conceive of such a thing? What does it say about God? About us?

God in a manger. God arriving to fulfill every promise God had ever made. God arriving to remake, restore, and renew his distorted creation. To make all things new, even you and me. It’s bigger than Christmas. Even bigger than Easter. The arrival is as big as God himself.

² In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah wears a garment made of hair and a leather belt. The Jews expected that Elijah would return from the heavens to announce the arrival of God’s Messiah.