

From this week's Old Testament Lesson, from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news!*

*Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news!*

*Lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"*

Isaiah 40:9

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It's a story almost as old as time itself. The story of humanity displaced by war and drought and famine and shame is as old as any other story since the dawn of civilisation. Since long before recorded history the threat of violence or starvation, the terror of disasters of nature's making or of our own making, have driven our ancestors from their homes, desperately seeking security and peace and hope.

And, as so many have before them, even today there are millions who sit in poverty and squalor and disease; who cope with abuse and rejection and violence; who live with fear and uncertainty; hoping for a better day. Praying desperately for a day when they might be able to go home. To return to a home better than the one that they were forced to leave; safer; more peaceful. The home they'd once hoped for but had lost. Maybe forever.

That's the context in which this week's Old Testament reading is set. An ancient story that plays out even now in virtually every corner of the world; in any number of dark and dirty, cold and cramped quarters where people are forced to live away from family and friends; away from home. In poverty and disease and insecurity.

In the case of this week's Old Testament reading, this is a story set more than 500 years before the time of Christ. And in this story it is the Babylonians who are in control; who have conquered the nation; who have overwhelmed the city and torn down its walls; who have destroyed utterly the great and glorious temple. And who, as conquerors have done for millennia, have carried off into exile the most powerful and the wealthiest of Jerusalem's people. To be exiles forever. To be strangers in a strange land. To be servants and slaves of Babylon's rich and powerful. For the rest of their lives. Maybe until that day, long off in the future, when they would completely forget Jerusalem. When they would forget that they'd once had another home. Maybe even that day when they would forget who they were. When they would forget that they had once been the people of God; that they'd once been the people that God had rescued from slavery to be his very own people. Living in their own land.

That's the context in which the Prophet Isaiah writes this week's First Lesson. But he writes not to remind them of all the horrors that they've faced. Not to speak of the disobedience and sin that led to their exile. Not to condemn them. Not to judge them. But to tell them that their time of trial would soon be over.

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended.*

*That her iniquity is pardoned.*

*That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

To tell them that, after all those years as refugees and migrants, their prayers had been heard. To tell them that they had not been forgotten in their exile. That the time had finally come to go back home. That the time had come to knock down the high places and build up the valleys; to bring in the heavy equipment to level the uneven terrain; to go out into the wilderness to make smooth the rough ground; to build a highway back home.

So when, in this week's gospel, John the Baptist stands before the representatives of the temple in Jerusalem to answer to their questions, he tells them that what God promised long before to the exiles in Babylon is what God is going to do right there, right then.

*Who are you, they ask him.*

*I'm not the Christ, he replies.*

*Are you Elijah, they ask again.*

*No, I'm not, he says.*

*Are you the prophet, they try one more time.*

*No.*

*Well then, who are you? Give us an answer.*

*I am a voice, John says. Simply a voice. I am a voice crying in the barren silence of the wilderness. A voice crying in all the many different kinds of wilderness we live in. I am a voice crying right now of what God said long ago. Make a way for God to come; because that's exactly what God is going to do.*

This week's gospel stands at the very end of our Advent journey. In just a handful of days we will gather again to hear the timeless tale of that moment when God himself entered into our dark and frightened and disordered world. As he had promised long before through the Prophet Isaiah. As John had promised to those who would listen. In just a few days we will hear again of that moment when God entered into the reality of our exile that he might take us home.

But John's words speak not just about what happened then, in the darkness of the night in Bethlehem but of what happens right now; when God comes to us in all the many darkneses that we face: whether that darkness is the darkness of fear or division or resentment or guilt.

*Make straight in the desert a highway for God, Isaiah said long ago. Make straight in your hearts a highway for God. Because, as Paul tells us this morning, 'the Lord is at hand'.*

I don't know what you're hoping for. Maybe something a lot different than you used to hope for when you were kids; when you hoped for just the right gift under the tree. I suspect that our hopes are much simpler now. In the light of all the uncertainty of our times, maybe nothing more than the opportunity to see family and friends at Christmas.

Somewhere in that first Christmas was a lot of terror: political turmoil; the threat of death and disorder; a shaking up in the established religious order. All of which sound all too familiar. We don't need things to be ideal or perfect to be able to enjoy Christmas. It seems as if God timed his entrance precisely to meet the chaos of our lives; and to heal that chaos with joy and peace. Which is exactly what he's willing to do right now if we're willing to make a way in our hearts for him to come.