

A Prophet in the Midst of Uncertain Times

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see?..To see a prophet? Yes. I tell you and more than a prophet.”
Matthew 11: 7, 11.

The collect, Hebrew scripture, and Gospel for today focus our attention on the prophetic preparation for the coming of Christ; while the psalm and epistle assure us of the steadfastness love and faithfulness of God’s deliverance. We are therefore, called to remain patience, hopeful and faithful as we wait for God’s deliverance.

I. A Voice of Comfort in a Time of Pain-Isaiah 40:1-11

Second Isaiah in chapter forty (40) sought to comfort his fellow exiles in Babylon as he anticipated God’s approaching deliverance of the captives. He composed a poem of preventient jubilation. It is like the anticipation in the desert before the spring rains; parents’ excitement and joy before the birth of a child or the sleeplessness of a young boy or girl the night before going to Disney Land. God now will speak tenderly to his people because their times of repentance and punishment have ended.

When Judah makes her way back to Zion and the exiles back to Jerusalem, the way will be made easy: valleys and marshes will be lifted up; high mountains will be brought low; uneven ground and rough places will be made smooth and straight and God’s glory will be revealed to the returning exiles as well as to the present inhabitants of Judah. The parched lands and barren fields will blossom with fragrant flowers and the mountains will flourish with lush grazing for the mountain sheep and wild gazelles. The songs of Zion will once again be heard in Jerusalem as the temple is rebuilt from her ashes. And, why? Because God has spoken it into being as God did the world at creation. Aren’t these words beautiful? Of course, these are not literal descriptions of what was to happen. They are rather poetic expressions to connote a superlative experience. The prophet concluded, *“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”* Isaiah 40:11. Such encouragement is needed in the darkest hours before the dawning of a new day or a different age. That is the role of the true prophet to forth-tell what God is about to do when the people can not see the coming restoration. And, Isaiah did just that.

II. A Voice Crying in the Wilderness-Mark 1:1-8

In the time of Jesus of Nazareth, Israel found herself under the political yoke of the powerful Roman Empire. Life was hard, tribute taxes were extremely high, the voice of prophesy had not been heard for four hundred years and the religious authorities seemed despondent, if not corrupt. Once again and forever, the voice of God was heard through an itinerant prophet in the wilderness of Judea. His name was John Ben Zachariah, a prophet extraordinary. He came from the priestly cast. He could have lived a life of comfort and ease, following in his father’s footsteps. Perhaps, he could have even been high priest. Nevertheless, like St. Francis of Assisi, he chose to live an austere life. In the wilderness, he dressed in rough clothing and ate a strict diet of locusts and wild honey. Of him Jesus later said, *“What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why*

then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold those who wear soft raiments are in king's houses. Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.'" Matthew 11:7-10. This prophet, John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the long expected Messiah in the darkest hour of military power, greed and hopelessness. His role was to call people to repentance and to baptize them with water for the forgiveness of their sins, as they awaited the coming of the long expected King of kings and Lord of lords. He came and for over two thousand years, the world can never and will never be the same.

During this Advent season, we in America are not living under a foreign power. We have been blessed never to have been subjugated and we pray that we never will. We are, nevertheless, under great economic stress. Home foreclosures are being made everywhere. The stock market vacillates. Americans are not secure as we travel to places like Mumbai, India or at home. Our armed forces are stretched to its voluntary limits. And we do not feel as secure as we once did.

Nevertheless, we need not seek for a messiah or a savior because Jesus Christ came over 2,000 years ago, once and for all. What we do need to do, in my estimation, is to reach out to that Messiah while confessing our sins and praying for divine guidance. I know of two things that can sustain us during such times: 1. Faith in a providential God, and 2. A tradition of remembering that God is always loving and faithful. The psalmist reminds us that *"Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."* Psalm 85:10. Now I want you to listen to this, *"Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven."* Psalm 85:11. When the truth is understood and lived-out by human beings below meets with the righteousness that comes down from God, then we can learn not to be so anxious about tomorrow because tomorrow is in God's hand. John the Baptist articulated that plainly in the wilderness as he baptized and prepared his people for the coming of the Lord.

His fiery message should enkindle our hearts. His austere lifestyle should inspire us to tighten our own economic belts. And, his call for a baptism of repentance can remind us to renew our own baptismal covenant as we prepare once again to receive the Christ Child into our hearts.

III. What Sort of Person Should You Be?-II Peter 3:8-15a

As we face uncertain times, the first question is, 1. What do we do in the mean time? The answer is no different than what people of faith did in the times of Isaiah and John the Baptist. We should wait patiently on the Lord with the confidence and assurance that God is always faithful. 2. The question is, upon whom should we depend? The answer is that we should depend only upon God; not upon our military might, our shaky financial resources nor upon our human efforts alone. These, as great as they have been, are fleeting securities and false assurances. 3. The question is, How shall we live in the mean time? The psalmist's answer is, *"I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him. Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land... The Lord will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase."* Psalm 85:8-9,12. God is good all of the time, if we listen and trust in him. 4. The question is, when will our answer come? The answer is found in the

wisdom of II Peter, Since “*with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day,...*” Therefore, “*Beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him in peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.*” II Peter 3:8,14. In the final analysis, it is not up to us. God is loving, just and faithful all of the time. Thus, the answer to anyone’s situation in uncertain times is to trust in and wait upon the Lord while living righteous lives, with worship to God and responsible relationship with each other. That is the answer and has always been the answer, but it takes a prophetic messenger to remind us of these things.

IV. Epilogue

Thus, the Second Sunday in Advent focuses our attention on the prophetic witnesses of Isaiah and John the Baptist as they forth-tell of the promise deliverance from uncertain times and as John calls for repentance of a people living in expectation. It also invites us to sing a psalm of assurance and reminds us of God’s steadfast love toward us as we encourage each other to stay the course and keep the faith. I would be remiss, if I did not emphasize the traditional theme for today- John the Baptist as the fore-runner of Jesus Christ and as one who defers to and point the way toward the coming Messiah.

Let us pray. O God who sent your messenger John the Baptist to prepare the hearts of your people and to point the way for Jesus Christ: May we do likewise as we witness to your Son among the people of our time. Amen.