

Advent with Isaiah (Isaiah 35.1-10)

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I was talking with one of the ministers from the presbytery the other day and he referred to the Isaiah Advent readings as his 'greatest hits'. He's got a point. They really are glorious pieces of scripture. After wrestling with the deceit and carnage of stories from the Book of Judges (as we did last month), these Advent prophecies glisten like drops of rain in a morning sun shower. Indeed, after weeks of dry in the furnace of baking winds, and coughing through days of smoke haze from the fires raging across our parched land, today's imagery of 'thirsty ground' as 'springs of water', and 'streams in the desert', are especially striking. If only, you may've been thinking as Janice was reading. If only it were so, here and now. In reality, imagery from the previous chapter seems more pertinent. At present, huge swathes of the country are black and smoldering (34.9), crops and gardens are withering (34.4), and animals dying (34.7). And with it, anxiety and agitation in communities grows.

Does that mean we've heard the wrong reading this morning, is this a case of lectionary malfunction? Would it be better if something more akin to the current situation were set? Or is this glorious vision exactly what's needed? Some good news to lift flagging spirits and encourage faith?

One of the powerful things about scripture is the way it can open us to a bigger perspective, and that's what I suspect this morning's reading intends to do. When these words were first penned, the people of Judah were in a bleak place as well. After years of being pulled and pressed by surrounding superpowers, their temple and city were in ruins and they in exile – the 'wilderness'. The prophet had been very clear from the get go that their harsh

and oppressive situation was a consequence of their choices and behavior, action and inaction – their pursuit of wealth and self-indulgence, expressed in idolatry, rebellion, compromise and abuse, and alongside it, their neglect of prayer, truth, justice and compassion. This living against the grain seemed to work for some of them for a time, but in the end, as the saying goes, ‘reality always wins’. They are reaping what they’ve sown and it is not good.

Yet in the midst of judgement, there is hope. Isaiah also insists that God is steadfastly loving and compassionate, and that beyond judgment lies regeneration. God will not leave the world oppressed, in bondage and drought. The passage we’ve just heard is another vivid portrayal this promise of God’s well-making presence. ‘*Here is your God*’, the prophet cries (4), ‘*he will come and save you*’.

Isaiah speaks with ‘lyrical anticipation’ of a time when aridity will be reversed (vv1-2, 6b-7), and when these disabled exiles will be healed (vv3-4) as they return safely home (vv8-10). The well-making begins with the large vista of creation - a proclamation of good news: ‘*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom...*’ *Wilderness, dry land, and desert* are contrasted with *Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon*, the three richest areas in that part of the world; a triad of barrenness/ a triad of fertility; creation as it’s meant to be – a fruitful, generative ecology – vegetation, blossom, colour, life! So much so, that the land itself breaks out in singing. In their dreaming and discerning of song lines, indigenous Australians also give hints of this. It’s as if the prophet, like them, is listening to land and spirit, the Spirit in the land. And then comes the rain: (verse 6b) ‘*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand (dry land) shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water*’. There’s that triad again, plus one – wilderness, desert, thirsty ground, burning sand – but now

it's springs, streams, pools, swamps – wet, wet, watery wet. It's a kind of breaking of the waters, the eruption of life that must be born, must be expressed. And with it comes healing, dancing, singing, joy: *'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like the deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy'* (5-6).

This passage, was originally addressed to people in exile, reminding them, as it does us, that the 'wilderness' (as barren as it looks and feels) can be a place of healing and transformation. It's a word of comfort and an exhortation to expect and trust this possibility: *'Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those of a fearful heart: Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God'. Strengthen...; make firm...; say...* it's full of imperatives; calling people to anticipate God's coming; to prepare the way by exercising faithful trust. That coming is described here as *'vengeance, with terrible recompense'*. There's a negative element to this, fleshed out in chapter 34, but vengeance in Isaiah also has a positive dimension. God comes restore a just, compassionate and flourishing ecology – to water the land, right wrongs, order chaos, heal sickness, and so on.

Little wonder then, that John the Baptist and Jesus draw on this imagery to describe and explain their mission. When John in prison seeks confirmation that Jesus is the *'one who is to come'*, Jesus sends messengers to bear witness to what they've seen and heard: *'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk ...the deaf hear, the dead are raised...'* (Matt 11.5).

Isaiah's vision culminates with a description of a joy-filled homecoming – of exiles streaming along the 'Holy Way' – ransomed, healed, forgiven – heading for home – fearless and singing – where joy and gladness awaits them. I can't read this passage without hearing the words of one of my old youth group songs: *'Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come*

with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and mourning shall flee away.'

This vision has a significant place in our tradition, it's a well-known and much-loved piece of scripture. And, meanwhile, here we are, experiencing something more akin to exile, struggling along in a world that seems increasingly to have lost its way, in a context that feels far from fertile or well. What are WE to make of these words? What do they have to say to us, living millennia after they were first penned, millennia after the coming of Christ? How do they help in our situation?

One thing that strikes me is that there's no suggestion anywhere of God giving up on the world, of God abandoning or wiping it out and starting again. This is a vision of rehabilitation, regeneration – the desert is refreshed; the disabled are healed; the exiles are released. The emphasis from go to woe is on transformation, not replacement. The images Isaiah shares are of redemption; God's presence reenergizing and restoring what's there. It's a vision of life – in all its fullness. And, as in Genesis 1, nothing is wasted, nothing lost, everything flourishes.

Sometimes in our situations (personal and corporate) it feels like it'd be easier just to start again, from scratch. But that's not God's way. God's way is to redeem and reconcile. God has not given up on our world, or our situation, or us, and as frustrated and overwhelmed and disempowered and sad as we may feel, neither can we. Isaiah wants God's people to know what's possible, what life can yet be; to seek the holy way and to travel it.

How do we that? We have to start where we are. God's holy way runs through the material world – through desert and difficulty, and that means acknowledging our situation and our response to it, letting ourselves feel the pain of it. And then we need to tune in, to become aware and make space for

God's presence and action, which occurs not as some intervention from the outside, but bubbles up from within, in and through the daily workings of our life – in our conversations, our meetings, our imagining, in hearts and communities that are spiritually attentive and actively responsive.

In this season of Advent, hearing passages like this one from Isaiah, we God's people are being called to practise radical hope – to look for and live in expectation of the 'new thing' God is always doing as part of the larger story of God's loving intention, not only for humanity but for the cosmos. And I wonder, what might that look like for each of us in the coming week, as we contend with challenging relationships, complex health issues, nagging fears and declining powers? Dare we trust, dare we watch and pray for God's promised presence and the '*dearest freshness deep down things*' (Gerard Manley Hopkins)? Now there's an Advent invitation, if ever there was!

Reference

Brueggemann, W (1998) *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.