

THE WAITING IS OVER

Both our scripture readings this morning are set against a backdrop of waiting. Our passage from the prophet Isaiah comes towards the end of this book. The book of Isaiah is commonly accepted to be divided into three different sections, most likely with three different authors. The first 39 chapters are connected to the First Isaiah and take place about 150 years prior to the Israelites being exiled from Jerusalem. They are chapters of warnings about judgment and calls for faithfulness and repentance of the Israelites who have turned from God. The Second Isaiah, sometimes referred to as the Deutero-Isaiah, writes during the time of exile after the deportation in 587 BC. Chapters 40–55 yield some of our most treasured passages like “comfort, comfort my people,” and “A voice cries out in the wilderness – prepare the way of the Lord” and “but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” The Deutero-Isaiah is filled with messages of hope and comfort for those whose lives have been rocked by dislocation. The last 10 chapters come from the Third Isaiah who writes in a time following the exile. The Israelites are allowed to return home. The waiting is over. There is hard work ahead in trying to redefine their new community, but God’s faithfulness and promise of redemption is assured. And it is here in the midst of returning home and building new community that we find today’s passage.

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

The Vindication and Salvation of Zion

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

These verses in Isaiah are hung on two hooks that are found in verse 10— “for he has clothed me with the garments of *salvation*, he has covered me with the robe of *righteousness*.” We see the Hebrew words for salvation and righteousness a combined total of six times in five short verses. Their repetition

indicates their importance. These words of salvation and righteousness are words that are often thrown around in our Christian speak without much pause for translation.

This past week, I spent time in Florida with my husband's extended family. We joke that we are a family of preachers and teachers—so the topic of religion comes up on a regular basis. One night over dinner we were discussing salvation and halfway through the conversation one of my cousins turned to my sister-in-law and said, "Saved from what?"

It is important to pause to consider what these verses say about salvation and righteousness. Righteousness in "plain speak" for me means how we act in order to make those we are in relationship with whole. It is honoring the relationship of community. It is asking the question "What will make this community and this relationship whole?" It is an obvious question for the new community of the Third Isaiah who is healing and redefining who they are.

There is no talk of individualism in this passage; it is not a private affair. This restoration springs up before all nations. Jerusalem will be restored and the nations will receive a new lease on life. This blessing of salvation and righteousness is not simply about my life or my family—this blessing is received and experienced in community. It is interconnected with all people. The exiles aren't saved just for themselves, but instead to set things right—not only for Jerusalem—but for all peoples and nations. Perhaps the better question isn't "Saved from what?" but instead, "Saved *for* what?"

The description in this passage is an unavoidable visibility. We are clothed with garments worn on the outside of our bodies. It is not just seeds that have covered the earth, but a garden that has sprung up for all to see. Righteousness shines out like the dawn and salvation a burning torch. This salvation cannot be ignored. In God's restoration of Jerusalem, salvation is seen everywhere.

And once we have been saved, restored, made right, we will never be the same again. We will be called by a new name that the Lord has given us. It is the entire message of the book of Isaiah. No matter what time and place, we live in hope toward a future which is claimed and redeemed by God.

It is that same hope that two elderly people have waited for in the first century. And it brings us to our Gospel lesson today. Simeon and Anna are two of the most faithful servants God has on hand at the time that Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple for Mary's purification ritual and sacrifice. There is little doubt that these pious individuals knew the teachings and message of Isaiah. Hear now Luke's account of this story ...

Luke 2:22-40

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Our waiting during the season of Advent lets us feel a little of what Simeon and Anna must have felt waiting for Jesus. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he saw the Lord’s Messiah. He was an old man waiting for this promise to be fulfilled, and now he can die in peace. Anna was 84 and likely a widow most of her life having been married only 7 years. I imagine this wonderful old lady whose life had little meaning after her husband died, so she spent all her time, night and day, at church praying and fasting. Their lives were filled with waiting.

This scene unfolds amidst the temple in Jerusalem ... the place of redemption for the exiles. Its very nature evokes a sense of salvation. It is the center of spiritual life, and its symbolism in this story should not be overlooked. Anna has been waiting in the temple for the restoration of Jerusalem and having seen the child, praises God and begins to speak to all looking for that redemption. It is as if her voice echoes Isaiah’s of the past, spreading a message of hope and redemption to those in Jerusalem. It should also not be overlooked the importance of her name. Anna in Greek would have been pronounced Hannah and this draws our memory to another Hannah, mother of Samuel—Samuel, who anointed the great King David—and David for whom Jerusalem is called “City of David.” The name Hannah has deep roots in Jerusalem and a deep connection to the promised King.

Simeon’s entire episode is chocked full with references from Isaiah. He has been looking forward to the consolation of Israel or the restoration and redemption of Israel. Simeon states once again this salvation is prepared in the presence of all people for both Gentiles and Israel. This baby is for all peoples and all nations. When Simeon speaks, he declares he has seen salvation. The work of God in Israel is now flesh in his arms. It is the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who saved his people from slavery. It is the same God who continued his saving work for his people in exile whose actions needed to be made right and whose relationship with God needed to be redeemed for God’s sake and for the world’s. It is this same God who comes in the form of a baby to put hands and feet on salvation. Simeon and Anna recognize the baby because it is the same God of the faith to which they have devoted their whole lives. It isn’t so much that Isaiah is a fortune teller predicting the Christ-event, but instead, Christ coming into the world was an extension of the God whose saving work was already at work in the world ... of a God whose very nature is to save.

Lastly, I want to draw your attention to what Simeon first declares—“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace.” It is the same way in which we would say “rest in peace.” But our English translation has thinned the rich meaning of this word “peace.” In Hebrew the word for peace is “shalom” and in Greek “εἰρήνη.” Peace is more than just the absence of violence or struggle, it means wholeness and completeness. As Christ followers, we are constantly striving for this wholeness. It is the ultimate saving goal of God’s for this earth. It is when steadfast love, justice, and righteousness all reign. It is no wonder

that we use this word “peace” so often at Christmas. We read about the peaceable kingdom during the Service of Lessons and Carols, sing hymns of peace, and wish each other “peace on earth.” Christ himself is called the Prince of Peace. Christ is wholeness perfected. We have been waiting for this hope and today like Simeon and Anna, we see it in the flesh, in a baby who comes in righteousness and peace for the salvation of the world.

Amen.