

Advent 2 December 10, 2023

This morning and next week, we will take up a special collection for the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. Now, usually I am quite opposed to doing “Special Collections,” but I believe that this one is very important. The Diocese of Jerusalem is comprised of 28 parishes throughout the Holy Land, and as important as their spiritual leadership, the diocese also runs three schools and two hospitals, one in the West Bank and one in Gaza, as well as healthcare clinics and mobile health clinics to serve the rural areas. Located in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza has sustained a huge amount of damage since the beginning of the war. The diocese of Jerusalem also runs a number of guesthouses, and the Christmas season is an important time for generating revenue to operate the educational and healthcare facilities, but this year, because of the war, these revenues have plummeted. At a time when the need is the greatest, reaching levels never seen before, the coffers are empty and there is little hope to fill them. And that’s where we come in: the United Thank Offering of the Episcopal Church, which has provided over a \$1 million in assistance since 1973 has a Challenge Grant: they will match every dollar of contributions made to the Diocese of Jerusalem before the end of the year. So we will take up a “Special Collection” today and next Sunday, funds to refill the coffers and offer an Advent hope to our Anglican friends in the Holy Land now so heartbreakingly torn by warfare.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, your word from the prophets comes to us today, bringing us your hope. Grant that we might live in that hope and let your hope shine forth in our lives. This we ask in the name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

One of the characteristics of this Season of Advent is that we hear the words of the prophets. These words, uttered more than two and half millennia ago, for the most part, these ancient words are brought to our attention. And despite their antiquity, perhaps even because of it in a fashion, those prophetic utterances still ring with a contemporary urgency. Our faith is that the words of the prophets is God’s word for us, God’s call to us to look beyond the chaos of our times, to look beyond whatever suffering is visited on our lives, to look both within and seek that peace of God within our souls, and to look out, to see how God is calling us in our world. One of the greatest scholars of the prophets in the last century was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and his work took this twofold outlook of the prophets very seriously, indeed it could be said that this was the hallmark of his understanding of the prophets. On the one hand, the

prophetic word speaks to our inner selves, seeking to take root in our souls. While that word may not change anything around us, it changes **us**. As Heschel noted this in connection with prayer,

Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

But the prophetic outlook, on the other hand, also engages our world. In this regard, Heschel notes,

The prophets never taught that God and history are one, or that whatever happens below reflects the will of God above. Their vision is of man defying God, and God seeking man to reconcile with Him.

It is this twofold aspect of the prophetic word, both nourishing our souls and challenging the twisted and evil systems of this world that we might be reconciled to God that is given a special and emphatic emphasis in Advent.

In this sense, today we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” What a thought; a word of comfort offered by God, yet to us in our day, in a world at war, in a world on fire as we set records for warm temperatures and the disasters they bring, in a world divided by race, a world with poverty and want in the midst of abundance, such words of comfort seem as meaningless as Shakespeare’s Hamlet sarcastically comments, “Words, words, words.” These are the words spoken to the people of Israel as they begin their exile in Babylon; a people defeated and uprooted, a people brought low and with their hopes extinguished. But tenderly, even in the midst of their pain, God inspires Isaiah to bring this word, to sustain the souls of people in the depth of their pain; God speaks this word to Isaiah to challenge the inequities of this world: even in the midst of their exile and homelessness, God shows a vision of the valleys lifted up, the mountains made low, the uneven ground and rough places smoothed out. A call to fear not, the shepherd comes to feed the flock, gathering the lambs and gently leading the mother sheep. Not just, “Words. Words, words,” but a vision and promise of peace and mercy come into their midst. Not “Words, words, words,” but good tidings, a true word of comfort.

A few centuries later a new prophet arrives on the scene in Israel, but the message is still the same: In the midst of the disasters of his day, John the Baptist cries out. John brings the people out to a new place: out to the wilderness to re-enact once more Israel's journey toward freedom, to re-engage with the movement from oppression to liberation. John calls the people to repentance, but this does not mean simply to

acknowledge their sins and shortcomings. No, here repentance means setting off in a new direction: with a new consciousness, with a new spirit, setting off in a new direction understanding that now God can act in a new way. John points to the changes that God will bring about, to bring God's savior into the world, to show the world the full power of God's love. John points ahead to the coming of the Messiah, but it is not so far off as to be simply a point of interest: no as John is aware through his new consciousness, this Messiah is coming soon; the advent of the savior is immanent, so now prepare the way. John's powerful prophetic preaching is dramatic in Mark's Gospel account, so that as we hear this Gospel story, as we listen to this Good News, we have our hearts and minds and souls opened to the coming of Jesus and we are re-oriented by this powerful Word.

And now, many centuries later we gather in a new Advent, still waiting for the savior, and still listening for the prophets in our time. This to me is the real work of the Advent season: to challenge myself not to see things in the same old way, not to see the world as it is and simply accept it as, but instead to look for the new ways in which God's Word comes to me. Already I have found this challenge particularly difficult: amidst the disorder in our world, amidst the controversy and the strife, I have found it particularly difficult to look for God's tenderness. Rather, my first instinct is to push back against this disorder by jumping in as well, adding my fight to the fray, yet all I accomplish in this regard is simply to create even more disorder. The real challenge is to listen for God's prophetic word, to seek that word that enables me to see in a new fashion, to become aware of God's call for a loving approach to the evils of the world. This way of looking, to see in a new way God's work in our lives and in the world takes time. As we heard read this morning in the second Letter of Peter, patience is required, it takes time. And we are given that time now: we have this season of Advent. We lit the second candle on the wreath today, there is more decoration put up in the Church in preparation for Christmas, but the season is still fresh, there is still time to begin to look for God in a new way in our lives. May this season open up the new possibilities in your life that God creates. As the ancient cry goes forth to make straight in the desert a highway for our God, may that prophetic call lead you into a new way of finding God active in your life and throughout our world. Take this precious time given to us all, listen for the prophetic call to open up your soul and to fire our imaginations. May this grace of Advent become a time when each of us prepared the way of Lord in accordance with the prophetic vision of

Isaiah. May God's grace in Jesus Christ continue to enrich our lives that we may become a blessing to others by that grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.