

“Believing!”

Isaiah 55: 1-9

Lent 3C/March 23, 2025

“It’s not always going to be like this”

This statement can be interpreted in different ways. One is with a sense of longing and perhaps a twinge of disappointment at not wanting to lose the joy and delight of a particular moment. You know that feeling of early friendship or love? When that other person, the object of your affection, knows you perfectly? Laughs at all your jokes? Finds you endlessly fascinating or attractive? Or maybe it’s the first time you hold a baby; whether it is your first a child or grandchild, and all is right with the world. Would you have ever dared to imagine that such perfection in miniature form existed? Or that first day of work in the career you’ve trained for and dreamed about? A moment filled with hope and possibility that you literally have that “pinch me” feeling as you survey the landscape. Then imagine someone swooping in to say “don’t worry, it won’t always be like this?” Wa wa wa. Right? How incredibly rude and insensitive to burst your euphoric bubble!

There is another way to experience this. Perhaps you’re (shall we say) the more seasoned married couple at a wedding watching the newly married couple filled with love and expectation. You remember dimly what that felt like. Or perhaps you’re the veteran parents of teenagers watching young parents cooing over their infant. You’re nearing retirement in the job to which you have given the last 30 years of your life and you watch the newly hired recruits, fresh-faced and eager to initiate all the changes they’re going to make to better humanity. Alas, we admit, with some melancholy and longing how it won’t always be this way.

Now, imagine your life is very different, full of challenges, struggles and disappointments, one after another. You wonder where God is in the midst of it. You ask the existential “why” questions seeking clarity or answers to those unanswerable questions. Then, in the midst of your morose, someone reassuringly reminds you, “it’s not always going to be like this.” That moment brings a momentary sense of relief.

We hear this morning from the prophet Isaiah whom God has called to bring a word of encouragement and hope to the people of Judah who are nearing the end of a long period of exile. They have endured hardships, made the best of the most difficult situations and persevered. Once they were a powerful people, comfortable and capable, until they were taken into exile in Babylon. The first 30 chapters of Isaiah is the story of a charmed people living a charmed life. Now, at the completion of what we call deuterio Isaiah or the second part of Isaiah’s story, their long period of hardship is about to end.

The role of prophecy is two-fold. God often sent prophets to afflict the comfortable, which, it turns out nobody likes very much. In fact, comfortable people tend to set up systems, processes and whole worlds trying to shelter and protect them from affliction. Isaiah has a tough assignment trying to remind the people where their primary loyalties should lie when they have become accustomed to aligning themselves with the King in power and subsequently enjoying the privileges afforded then via their allegiance.

In her writing, Meg Jenista notes how the first 40 chapters of Isaiah chronicles the experience of God's people in the land, flourishing in property and power but atrophying in fidelity to the God who got them there, atrophying in faithfulness to one another, atrophying in creative, redemptive hopes that go beyond personal, selfish accumulations. Now in chapter 55 Isaiah is addressing a people that may have lost the memory of those glory days, but are more than ready to end their exile and recapture a sense of that glory, even if it means giving up their allegiance to the King. She says, this cues up the second role of a prophet which may be far more amenable.

Prophets afflict the comfortable by cautioning them, "it's not always going to be like this." They also speak comfort to the afflicted, by assuring them, "It's not always going to be like this." Isaiah is sent to remind them of this. He knows what their lives have been like in exile. They've left behind their lands. Many families have been separated. They're under the rule of a foreign power and surrounded by foreign culture, religion and society. Their lives are all really and truly afflicting. And he assures them, it's not always going to be like this.

In this week's Lectionary text, the comforting of the afflicted explodes into layered images. Each one intended to potentially hook the peoples' hope. Isaiah proclaims:

If you are thirsty, drink. If you are a long way off, come. If you have no money, it's free! If you are disheartened, 'your soul will delight.' If you are deflated, 'come to me and your soul may live.' If you are groping blind in the darkness, see! Behold!
If you are lost, seek. If you are alone, call on God.

Each proclamation seems more reassuring and hopeful than the other.

Their sense of being God's beloved and chosen people had been thrown radically into question as they emerge from this decades long trauma. But now they were preparing to resettle in their destroyed homeland. It is like a second exodus. I imagine they felt both hope for a new beginning and a bit of trepidation about what the future would hold. Perhaps a sense of sorrow lingered for the towns and cities which may have lay in ruins, and the memory of family members who were killed or from whom they had been separated.

In the midst of this, Isaiah is incredibly perceptive to the new thing that God is doing, and of God's remembrance of God's people. He declares, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Isaiah is grasped by a profound and boldly confident theological vision of God's promised redemption of God's people. He perceives this new thing that God was doing even if the people are not yet able to see it. This, after all, is the role of the prophet, empowered to deliver a salvific word of God. He reminds them to take heart. Have faith. "It's not always going to be like this."

Even as we live through or move beyond the most challenging moments in our own lives, we are not always able to envision the new thing that God promises. Perhaps we have not yet sufficiently healed from this event that threatened to undo us. In the beginning it may seem as though our pain is never far from us, but in time we experience healing and renewal. In time we are able to acknowledge and then perhaps even celebrate the new thing that God promises. In time.

I know that in the early days of my divorce I experienced the world very differently than I do today. My pain was very real and I was consumed with making my children's lives as free of pain or trauma as I could. I felt God's presence in the midst of it, sending comfort, assurance and encouragement in many different ways, even when I was not sure what the future would bring. I did however hold onto the promise that "it would not always be this way."

The preacher Rick Fry observes how "God's word is a powerful affirmation of promised transformation. Whatever fears we face, whatever sin we feel is unforgivable, whatever heartbreak or loss or despair we face, none of these things are any match for God's powerful and transforming word which has claimed us. This word will never let us go. And this word reaches out even into the darkest places and claims those most vulnerable. The sound of this word will reach those who need to hear it most. The light of this word will sweep across the face of creation. It cannot be stopped, and will not return empty until it has accomplished that which God purposes, and succeed in the thing for which God sent it."

Isaiah is talking to a wounded people about repentance. Repentance is one of those words we think about during the season of Lent. Kate Bowler invites us to envision repentance as a new way of thinking or seeing things instead of moralistic or contractual (as in do good and avoid evil or God will punish or bless?) She shares a story of Fr. Greg Boyle. He reflects on the impact of repentance within the community of former gang members, men and women, with whom he ministers in Los Angeles, each of them struggling to craft new lives for themselves.

In his reflection he writes, "Repent. Right away we are triggered by the word.

"Cut it out."

"Get with the program."

"Stop being bad and try being good."

He shares the story of a gang member, Louie, who sat in his office at Homeboy Industries and was sobbing. "How come everyone here loves me?" The crying intensifies. "I mean...everyday...I take myself to court...and everyday...I find myself guilty." He thinks a bit.

“I signed on the dotted line...to everything I’ve done. If you knew who I really am...it would dissuade you...from loving me.”

Repent.

It means “to move beyond the mind you have.” It doesn’t mean “do good and avoid evil.” It is about seeing things differently. There is an invitation in it to embrace the mystical view; to see as God does. Louie needs to recognize his own unshakeable goodness. No need to become someone he is not. The gentle urging of our tender God is for Louie to recognize what has been there all along. He needs to move beyond the mind he has, so he can see it.

Fr. Boyle admits, “I will bury, in a week’s time, a young man named Sammy. He will be the 240th young person killed in our streets for no reason at all. Before he left us, he “repented.” He ceased to see himself “as less than,” and came to know fully that he was exactly what God had in mind when God made him. The Buddhists say, “Oh nobly born, remember who you really are.” He did. He inhabited this truth and it gave him resilience, a grateful heart and a capacity to love his enemies. He moved beyond the mind he used to cling to, that only saw worthlessness and deficit. He moved away from that and began to reside in abundance. He found his true self in loving.

Repent.”

This is God’s hope for us. That we see ourselves and our world as God’s sees it. That we believe in our own belovedness not matter what has or will happen in our lives. This is the word that the prophet showered upon his people as they moved into the newness of life that God promised beyond their exile. God calls us to repent, to see the world differently, to accept that God is always present with us. God’s ways are not always our ways. We may not always understand God’s ways, but we can trust in God’s presence. Indeed, it will not always be this way! May it be so. Amen