

Isaiah, Mary and Hannah
Radical Messengers of God
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Advent 3

We have two related passages this morning in the passage from Isaiah and the Magnificat. As I have mentioned the last two Sundays we have a series of three passages from Isaiah in Advent. All filled with prophesy for then, Jesus' time and now. Today we hear from Third Isaiah, the prophet who is speaking to his people after Cyrus the Persian has conquered the Babylonians.

Cyrus not only allows the people to return to rebuild Jerusalem, but also gives them back most of the temple goods the Babylonians stole when they conquered them. Now the challenge is to convince the newly free people to leave a rather luxurious city and return to Jerusalem, which is basically rubble and begin to rebuild. In their minds justice has been done and God has prevailed, but it is a mixed blessing so Isaiah needs to motivate them to return.

This passage of is Isaiah quoted by Jesus in both Matthew and Luke when he is preaching in Nazareth. This is the scene where he enters the synagogue in his home town and takes the scroll reads the opening 4 verses of this passage, hands the scroll back, sits down and pronounces that this prophecy has been fulfilled in your hearing. Now as you also may remember Jesus is rebuked by the people in his home town and famously says that a prophet is not welcome in his own town. In part I believe this is because he does proclaim the radical message of freeing all who are oppressed. In proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor he is declaring a jubilee year when all debts are forgiven, lands that have been mortgaged are returned to the family that owns them, a really radical message.

Now pair this with the Magnificat that we heard in place of a Psalm. The setting is shortly after the angel Gabriel has told Mary just what God has in store for her and she has agreed. She goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who in her old age is also miraculously pregnant with a baby who will become famous as John the Baptist.

When Mary enters the room the baby that Elizabeth is carrying jumps in her womb and Elizabeth says, "Of all women you are the most blessed. Mary responds with what we now know as the Magnificat. The way we read it today is the form in which it appeared in the early church and is one of the oldest Christian hymns that we have.

What a radical message this canticle, this song of Mary proclaims. Somebody mentioned how the used to love to sing this canticle back in the days of Morning

and Evening Prayer. Numerous musical compositions have been written over the centuries using this text. Yet I wonder if we really ever think about what a revolutionary message is contained in these few verses.

Now it is important to understand that this message of care for the poor, the marginalized the last and least is not a new message, but in fact comes from the earliest days of Israel earlier even than Isaiah by at least 1500 years. Mary shows her Jewish roots for the Magnificat is very close to the Song of Hannah. Hannah an older woman who has never had a child has been at the door of the temple day and night praying. Praying so much and acting so strange that Eli accuses her of being drunk and tells her to go away. She tells her that she is praying for a son and has promised God that she will dedicate him to the temple if God will hear her prayer. Eli tells her that her prayers will be answered. When she becomes pregnant she responds with what is known as the Song of Hannah 1 Samuel 2. Hannah does present the child to the temple and he grows up serving at the temple. This child will become the prophet Samuel. Listen to the parallels with the Magnificat as I read the first half of the Song of Hannah:

1Sam. 2:1 Hannah prayed and said,
“My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

1Sam. 2:2 “There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.
3 Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
4 The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
6 The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
8 He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
and on them he has set the world.

All this goes to show that the message that Jesus brought the world was not something new, but in fact has deep roots in Judaism. Jesus was just teaching what the prophets had long been proclaiming and failure to heed these teachings in part to blame for the recurring problems the young nation of Israel encountered.

Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic bishops in the US has made the cause of the poor, the widow the orphan, the refugee a top priority and have been severely criticized by many for this. Our Presiding Bishop and Archbishop of Canterbury consistently hold up the need to care for the last and the least as our Christian obligation. This caring for the least is at the heart of our many Outreach ministries that you support through your generous gifts above and beyond your pledge by making contributions to our many special funds which support these ministries. These include Head Start, Norfolk Homeless ministry, Seton Youth Shelters, the food pantry, Christmas ministry, knitting/shawl ministry, and the list goes on. For all of these I am grateful and proud of our parish.

Sadly the work is never done and we seem to have the poor always with us as Jesus teaches. The Good News of Jesus is about more than just his victory over death and personal salvation. For me that is an important but small part. As we approach Christmas we approach that special moment, what Richard Rohr and others refer to as the scandal of the particular. That God was with us in human form for a brief period at a particular time in history. I truly believe that this is the time when God reached out to us through his son to show us what it meant to be fully human. If we would all actually live the Good News with all of its challenges the kingdom would be here.

This Christmas I hope you will be aware of those moments when you are the hands and feet of Christ. Look for those opportunities to be that advocate for those who are oppressed, neglected or forgotten. Take the opportunity to be the redeemed and generous character of Scrooge in the Christmas Carol after the visits from the 3 Christmas ghosts. Live the true spirit of Christmas.