

Our Turn is Coming!
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

¹ The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
⁵ Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;
⁶ but you shall be called priests of the LORD,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.
⁷ Because their shame was double,
and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.
⁸ For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰ 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.

- ¹¹ 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. **Isaiah 61:1--11 (NRSV)**

Sermon:

The first three Sundays of Advent, I selected lectionary passages from Isaiah. My intent has been to show how three different prophets understood God working within the life of their people or as we would say their nation. The Isaiah authors at times speak just for themselves, but more often they speak either as the voice of God or as the voice of the people.

Therefore, it is to this point of national or collective identity, what might be called national theology, that I would like to speak to this morning. As I look and listen to the cacophony of horrors, insults, corruption, and disjointed morality and ethics at play in our nation and how such things are adversely affecting people at all social levels, I believe it is important that we hear the prophetic voices in Isaiah. Those voices speak words that range from doom and gloom, hope and promise, to fulfillment, but each prophet emphasizes that God is ultimately in charge and that eventually justice and righteousness will prevail.

We know that the leaders of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and Judah, the Southern Kingdom, did not heed original Isaiah's warnings and suffered the wrath of the Assyrians. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, was destroyed and its leadership and some survivors were scattered throughout the Assyrian empire. (The so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.) The Southern Kingdom, Judah, thereafter became a vassal of the Assyrians. Later the successors to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, would cart many of the leaders of the Jewish people off into exile in response to Judah's multiple attempts at rebellion.

During the time of the Babylonian Exile, an unknown prophet penned the beautiful, poetic passages of hope, deliverance, and restoration that we heard last week. Second Isaiah speaks tenderly to the people, calling the Jews the Suffering Servant of God and how these purged and purified Jews will be delivered and become the saviors and blessing to the nations. In today's passages, we've heard yet another author, the author of a Third Isaiah, speaking words of restoration and blessing but now with a more defined nationalistic or collectivistic element to his words of restoration and recompense.

When the first small group of exiles returned from Babylon they found much of Jerusalem in ruins. The area was populated by squatters living on many of the returnee's ancestral lands and, if not initially, soon these squatters would turn hostile toward the returnees. The Samaritans also became hostile toward the returnees as well as other peoples in the area. In addition, the returnees experienced drought, crop failure, hunger, and rampant inflation. The prophet Haggai, writing about the same time as Third Isaiah, declared that the troubles afflicting the people was yet more punishment from God because the people had neglected the rebuilding of the temple as a sign of their gratitude to God for their restoration.

In all fairness, many in the small band of returnees became disheartened at the resistance they encountered, the loss of ancestral land and property with no legal means or power to reclaim it. Couple this with drought, crop failures, and inflation, is it any wonder they defaulted to their own survival interests?

These personal interests eventually would pit various groups in Judah against one another. Civil and religious leaders, per Haggai, were more interested in personal gain than rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem or God's Temple. The court system, what there was of it, was riddled with

corruption. Furthermore, the people in general become so mean spirited and defensive that it seems they begged off Second Isaiah's vision of the Jews and Jerusalem becoming "a light to the Gentiles" and allowing the people of the nations to participate in God's covenant promises. It is believed that the Book of Job was written to address just such a situation. Eventually, the Jews of this era under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah would put into place many of the practices and policies that have come to characterize Jewish exclusivity, such as the restrictions against Jews marrying non-Jews, etc.

The author, in the spirit of the Lord's anointing, is now bringing good news to those brokenhearted returnees, who had been held captive, indentured, and now treated badly as well as suffering the vagaries of climate. The good news is: now it is your turn, the year of the Lord's favor, the day of the vengeance of God. Now the people will be honored and recognized as pillars of righteousness no longer to stand in dishonor before the nations as a people whose god had abandoned them.

Once the people had been dispossessed of their land and wealth and forced into servitude to foreign masters. Once the wealth of Jerusalem and the Temple had been carried off by foreigners, but now God will see to it that the wealth of the nations will flow back into Jerusalem and those who had victimized the Jews will now serve them as slaves. Now the people of other nations, especially their defeated Assyrian and Babylonian enemies and their gods, will know the dishonor and shame of the Jews. And, all the Jews, not just the priestly classes, will be freed up to serve as priests before God while those of the nation's serve them and their basic needs.

This comes about because the Lord loves justice, hates robbery and wrongdoing, no matter who the perpetrators or to whose ends. Now the Lord will direct recompense toward God's people and they and their descendants will be honored and respected among the nations as the Lord's blessed and restored people.

The author as the voice of the people breaks into praise proclaiming he/they will greatly rejoice in the Lord, who has clothed them in the garments or trappings of restoration and salvation as a sign of an eternal covenant. The Lord's salvation, recompense, and retributions will deck out God's people with boughs of glory, like well adorned bridegrooms and brides. The people of God will be well-appointed priests and all the nations will know and praise God's righteousness towards God's people.

Eventually, with the authority of the Persian king, the Priest-Scribe, Ezra, through some very strident policies and means brought about a degree of social and religious cohesion among the returnees. The Persian appointed governor, Nehemiah, is credited with the actual rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple as well as instituting various social and economic reforms that brought about stability and prosperity. I add that rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple initially would have been underwritten by the wealth of "foreigners", i.e. the Persians, that flowed into Jerusalem. Eventually, a significant percentage of ancestral lands and property were restored to the returnees and their grievances dealt with.

Each year during Advent, passages of scriptures from the common lectionary herald the coming of God's restoration and justice for God's people amid the facts that the world, just as in the author's day, appears to be going to hell in a hand basket. Therefore, what do we say about Third Isaiah's insights, considering 2,500 years of history? Do we simply say he was wrong? Well, not so for many of the returnees. What do we say about Jesus' proclamation as he envisioned the coming of the kingdom within the context of these passages of scriptures in the Gospel of Luke? Was he wrong? No, not for those who embraced or embrace his way before God.

Therefore, both Third Isaiah and Jesus were right, if we understand that the prophets do not make historical predictions about events out in the distant futures of others. Rather, the prophetic word has always been addressed to God's people in their present or immediate futures and only

tangentially to others of some distant future. The message being, if people will obey God's will and ways, then there will be justice and prosperity for all, even for those who may have given up hope of God's saving presence in their world. If people don't obey God's will and ways, then things will continue to deteriorate and there will be great uncertainty and instability.

The prophet, therefore, says to God's people in their present situations and to their near futures who are distraught, mired down in vindictive religious, political, and economic rivalries; living in fear and hatred of people of other nations; those oppressed and victimized by corrupt governments and judicial systems, and people struggling with the impacts of natural forces on their livelihood, to hold on. In God, there is hope, hold on, don't give up, don't give in, remain faithful to God's will and ways; don't compromise with the forces of this world. God is in charge, relief and restoration is coming. Relief and positive change may come in acts of nature or in acts of well-reasoned, human choices; acts of human compassion, justice, or, yes, even sometimes by force, but it is coming.

Despite an often-prevailing cynicism about Christmas, Christmas still holds a wonder and mystery for many of us because somewhere amid all the commercial and social hullabaloo something overtakes us. For me, it is usually on Christmas Eve. I don't want to rush into the Spirit of Christmas. This something clears the most well-reasoned cynicism and pessimism to reveal the childlike wonder of Christmas. And, what is the wonder of Christmas? Hope! Not a hope born of human self-interest, personal gain, comfort, or safety, but a hope born of our capacity and the capacity of others to love beyond self-interest, but mostly in the hope of God's love and its promises of salvation now and forever.

The Christmas season despite its crass commercialism and superficiality is a time when the human heart, if only for a few unguarded moments, may suspend reality with its cynicism and bask in the idea that we are tenderly loved and cared for by our Creator-Sustainer. It is a hope that morphs into the knowledge of faith that reminds us that God is in charge and things will eventually work out for the good. This hope was and is given reality for many of us in the birth, the life, the teachings, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. A message that says, yes, there is justice in this world, there is compassion, but the greatest measures of justice, love, and blessing comes continuously into the hearts and minds of people, who embrace the Good News of God in the Christ child.

So, as the Jews across the span of the book of Isaiah give witness, hang in there, trust God, things are going to change for the better - any moment now. The message of Christmas is that God appeared and appears in those times, when humanity has little hope with good news for the oppressed in body, mind, and spirit; good news for the brokenhearted, good news for those held captive to the internal and external demonic forces that harm body, mind, and soul. The good news is the hope of the faithful, the repentant, and the powerless. The good news speaks of restoration and salvation in Jesus Christ, so just hold on; keep the faith, he is coming and the kingdom is coming, just you wait and see. Faithful of God, Our Turn is Coming! Hold on, hold on, hold on.