

UNTITLED

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 4, 2024

Isaiah 40:2-31; I Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-29

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A word on preaching sermons:

Some of you may have noticed that I said the Old Testament reading was from the BOOK of Isaiah, not the words of the PROPHET Isaiah. That's because Isaiah is different from the other Latter Prophets, like Jeremiah and Hosea. There's not just ONE Isaiah. There are THREE. And unlike Jeremiah, we don't know much about any of them, because they don't write much about themselves.

The three books of Isaiah were written across a long period of time - two hundred and sixty years, to be precise. First Isaiah - Chapters 1-39 - was written before the Exile, between 740 and 700 BCE. And there's not just one Exile to Babylon. There are really three: 605, 597 and finally 586, the year when the City of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon were destroyed.

The book can be read as an extended meditation on the destiny of Jerusalem into and after the Exile. The middle part of the book, Second Isaiah, describes how God will make Jerusalem the centre of his worldwide rule through a royal saviour, a messiah, who will destroy the oppressor Babylon; this messiah is the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who is merely the agent who brings about Yahweh's kingship. Isaiah speaks out against corrupt leaders and on behalf of the disadvantaged. He roots righteousness in God's holiness rather than in Israel's covenant.

Second Isaiah, also called Deutero-Isaiah - Chapters 40-55 - was written as the Israelites are about to return to their homeland, starting in 538 BCE. Cyrus the Great, the Emperor of Persia, conquers Babylon in 539 and allows the Hebrews to return home the following year. Second Isaiah contains the Suffering Servant Songs that prophesize the coming of the Messiah.

Third Isaiah - Chapters 55 - 61 - was written about 515 to 480 BCE, well after the exiled Jews return to Judah. It is a collection of oracles by unknown prophets in the years following the return from Babylon. In this section the rebuilding of the Temple is already underway. The return, however, was not without problems: the returnees found themselves in conflict with those who had remained in the country and who now owned

the land. There were further conflicts over the form of government that should be set up. This background forms the context of Third-Isaiah.[30]

Second Isaiah injects two very important concepts into theology for the first time. The first is complete and absolute monotheism. Isaiah rejects the idea the YHWH is A God who belongs to Israel. Instead, YHWH is the ONLY God in the Universe. The other quote Gods, such as Baal and Dagon, are just figments of human imagination, idols carved by men. They are not really REAL!!!

Isaiah 44:6 contains the first clear statement of monotheism: "I am the first and I am the last; there is no other God besides me ". Second Isaiah proclaims that Israel is unique: It is the servant of YHWH. Israel is to carry the worship of the one and only, true and living God ,to the ends of the earth.

Before Second Isaiah, suffering is understood as punishment for sin. Thus, if Israel suffers misfortune or calamity, it is because she has become unrighteous and sinful. But Second Isaiah introduces a new concept: vicarious suffering, the suffering of the innocent righteous person for the sake of the salvation of sinners. That is the theme of the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah Chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52 through 53. It is the principle that underlies Christ's atonement for our sins.

Reading a portion of one of Paul's letters is like my reading you a page out of James Joyce's Ulysses and then asking you to tell me the plot of the whole book. Today's Lectionary selection is no different. It makes much more sense if you start at the beginning of this chapter. Paul is explaining why and how he is different from all the other apostles. They all earn money for themselves from their congregations, the way we pay Chris' salary. And in the first part of this chapter Paul justifies and rationalizes this so as not to denigrate the other apostles.

But Paul is different; his is a tent-making ministry. Now we don't know exactly what he did to earn his own livelihood. He could have actually made tents, like the women he stayed with in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquilla. Or he could have been a weaver, or a cobbler who made sandals, or a leathersmith. The word covers a great many occupations. When Paul visited Corinth to convert the Jews of that city and to preach to the Gentiles, on his second missionary journey, he stayed 18 months, establishing the church there. Paul actually wrote four letters to the Corinthians, but the first and the third have been lost. When he writes what we now have as First Corinthians, it is three years after his protracted stay in the city.

And the church in Corinth is in deep trouble. There is abuse of spiritual gifts, lax toleration of sin, proud assertion of Christian liberty, and doubts regarding some of the central Christian doctrines. So, Paul, in this letter, is trying to get the church back on track. But unfortunately, we know that he doesn't succeed. We know from Pope Clement the First's Epistle to the Church at Corinth that the church splintered into divisive groups and that several elders who had been appointed by Paul had been expelled from the church.

The Gospel lesson for today could be called "A Day in the Life at Capernaum." My hunch is that what Mark is trying to do is to give his readers an idea of what a typical day in the life of Jesus is really like. Capernaum was a small town on the Northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was the hometown of Matthew the tax collector. It no longer exists, except as an archaeological site.

After teaching in the Synagogue, Jesus spends the evening, after sunset, after the end of the Sabbath, healing all sorts of maladies in all sorts of people. It is important that the first person healed is a woman, because it shows that Jesus is inclusive of those who, at that time, were thought to be less important. And those healed are immediately incorporated back into society, restored as it were.

Later in this chapter, Jesus heals a leper and tells him to go to the Synagogue and make the sacrifices Moses commanded as thanks for his healing, but not to tell the priests who healed him. Naturally he doesn't do as he is instructed.

In the very early morning, Jesus seeks a lonely and private place to pray. This was a common Jewish practice and whenever Jesus goes to pray, he does so alone in private. So, this passage shows us the three facets of Jesus' ministry: Preach, Heal, Teach.

I am going to conclude on a personal note. I started out my ministry as a Director of Christian Education in Jennings, teaching: Communicants Class, Adult Education, and so forth. The main portion of my career was spent as a Pastoral Counselor: healing, not in the way Jesus did, but much more laboriously. And now I am wrapping up my life doing what I never thought I would be doing: Preaching. I guess I have completed a day in the life of Jesus. AMEN