

Shock and Awe

Second Sunday of Advent † Isaiah 40:1-11
First United Methodist Church, Des Moines
December 4, 2011

Our readings for Advent draw heavily on the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Today's reading from Isaiah offers a good example.

This reading begins what scholars call Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55. While Isaiah appears as one unified book in the Bible, scholarship shows it is more likely three books written at different times, by different hands, with a consistent overarching theme.

Second Isaiah was written about a decade after the Babylonian empire had conquered Israel, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem (the focal point of Jewish religion), and deported a majority of the Israelites to exile in Babylon. Removed from their homeland, which they still understood as the land God promised them, and from the holy city of Jerusalem built on Mt. Zion, the Israelites had grown increasingly depressed and bitter.

The words of the 137th Psalm capture their anger at the Babylonians who destroyed their Temple on Zion and hauled them into exile:

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

*How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.*

*Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!”*

In this time of despair, bitterness and anger, God gives the prophet an assignment: "Comfort, O comfort my people." Two voices then speak the words of comfort, announcing the Lord's coming to rescue Israel.

The first voice predicts the God's coming in vibrant imagery. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

All this moving and shaking of the earth will be for one purpose: "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed..."

The second voice then takes over from the first and bleakly describes the frailty and transience of human power. "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades..."

But there is something, the second voice says, which will not wither or fade. "...the word of our God will stand forever."

God's never failing word is coming to the people of Israel, the second voice proclaims: "See, the Lord God comes with might..."

What could that have meant to the Israelites held in captivity in Babylon? We cannot know for sure. But we can imagine from our humanity. They likely heard these words as the announcement of their rescue. Perhaps they also thought these promises included the revenge their hatred created. The 137th psalm ends with a blatant, heated yearning for revenge that we rarely read in worship:

*O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock.*

The human expectation, in short, would have been shock and awe: the might of the Lord descending on imperial Babylon and giving the Babylonians a taste of their own violence.

But this is where Isaiah surprises us and, I suspect, surprised the Israelites who heard these words of comfort 2,500 years ago.

For Isaiah describes the "might" in which the LORD God comes to comfort Israel quite differently from shock and awe.

The might of God appears in four ways:

1. God will feed his flock like a shepherd;
2. God will gather the lambs in his arms;
3. God will carry the lambs in his bosom;

4. God will gently lead the mother sheep.

Not shock and awe. Not bombast and pyrotechnics. God's might is shown in tender comfort, in gentleness and care, in unconditional love.

As Christians, we read this promise of Isaiah from the perspective of Christmas day. When Isaiah says, "word of our God will stand forever" we hear the poetic and majestic opening of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

In Jesus, the Word become flesh, Christians see what Isaiah foretold. Through Jesus life, we learn not to look for God's might in fireworks and extravaganzas. Rather, as Isaiah saw through faith, through Jesus see God's might in tenderness; in patient, gentle, persistent care; in unconditional love. God's might is God's love.

We see God's love in Jesus Christ, who revealed God's mighty love by trusting God with his life and with his death. So, with Charles Wesley's words, which echo the words of Isaiah the prophet, we pray an Advent prayer:

"Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee."

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.