LIMITED ACCESS?

Isaiah 35
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
Third Sunday in Advent December 15, 2019

These Sundays of Advent we have been looking together at Isaiah’s prophetic visions of the restoration of Judah after the people’s long exile. These visions offered words of hope and promise in the midst of difficult, even desperate situations, words of encouragement to a people who were having trouble finding their courage. Across the centuries these words have also been seen by Christian people as descriptions of the new age that was begun with the birth of Jesus Christ, and of the final redemption of the earth at his return.

Today’s passage from Isaiah 35 seems, at first glance, to provide yet another variation on the restoration and peace that await the exiles. Whereas last week’s reading from the eleventh chapter foretold a day when lions and lambs would lie down together, the dominant images at the beginning of Isaiah 35 are of flora rather than fauna.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

This vision describes the transformation of a land of leanness and non-productivity into a garden alive with colorful blossoms; the reference to the “glory of Lebanon” and the “majesty of Carmel and Sharon” add the promise of reforestation. But Isaiah has more in mind than merely a change in the scenery. The restoration of the land hints broadly at the restoration of the people, who have been scattered abroad and who are awaiting divine intervention to bring them home again.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God... He will come and save you.”

In the wonderful imagery of the third strophe of the vision, Isaiah blends the transformation of the lives of God’s people with the transformation of the natural order.

Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.
God is the life-giver, the provider of joy, the granter of beauty and splendor. “The world will look different as God comes to save the people of God. The oppressed earth will receive attention equally with that extended to the oppressed of the earth.”

The prophetic poem reaches its culmination and climax in the final strophe, which has proven to be something of a puzzle for translators over the years. The Hebrew of verse 8 has been especially problematic. The NRSV of our pew Bible says:

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel upon it,  
but it shall be for God’s people.

Most other translations follow a similar reading of the text. But you will note in this verse two footnotes, which suggest that the Hebrew is uncertain and may actually read as follows:

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not pass it by,  
but it shall be for them.

The two readings are slightly different in wording, but worlds apart in meaning. Either God’s way will exclude the unclean, or it is intended for them as well. In a compelling article some years ago the Biblical scholar Walter Harrelson made a strong case for this latter reading, and my rather unscientific poll of several Hebrew scholars seems to confirm Harrelson’s take on the matter. Harrelson argued that Isaiah intends to promise God’s tender care for those who might normally be excluded from redemption: this Holy Way will be one that the unclean, those normally kept at the margins of the community, will not find closed to them.

Why have translators so regularly missed such an understanding of the text? It’s not surprising, says Harrelson, because the more common translation fits within the theology of Israel. However, there is no indication that the transformation of nature and history of which Isaiah speaks has only the Hebrew people in mind, or only those who are faithful to the Torah. In fact, the text places its emphasis upon God’s gathering up those who are wounded of body, those with physical limitations, those marked as unclean, and those with limited rational abilities (“even fools shall not go astray”). Just as the waste places of the earth will undergo transformation, so will those who do not enjoy robust health or strength or capacity to cope with life. The highway is laid down for everybody. There is no limitation of access to this highway. It is laid down for all.

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2 Harrelson, 252.
3 Harrelson, 255.
And if that is true, then this is a different kind of highway that Isaiah envisions. If I were to use metaphors from our own time to describe it, I would see this “Holy Way” as the highway of the great unwashed. I see a highway that starts not at the airport, but at the local bus station. And the hotels and stores and restaurants along the roadside are Motel 6 and the Dollar General Store and Waffle House, rather than the Ritz-Carlton, Tiffany’s, and Le Bernardin. This is the welcoming road of all God’s children, particularly those who have not been invited on the journey before.

Isaiah here presents a daring vision of hope on the other side of loss and illness and suffering. The old saying is that “we make plans according to our ideas, but we obey our pain.” If we read Isaiah’s words in this new way, what we discover is that there is hope on the other side of that pain. And that is a word I claim for all of you who are hurting in body, mind or spirit this day. It is a word I claim for all who find themselves on the outside looking in. It is a word I claim for those who fight against the demons of mental illness, those who languish in veterans’ hospitals all alone in these holidays, and for the homeless men and women who stand like rag-tag sentries with their pleading signs at intersections, and for all the other untouchables in our culture. It is a word I claim for all those who have suffered great sadness and loss in this year now past and face the coming of Christmas with as much dread as joy, perhaps more.

There is a poignant scene in the musical, Cotton Patch Gospel, which our youth choir has presented several times across the years. In the second act, as the drama of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is unfolding, the story’s narrator seems to borrow a bit from Isaiah’s vision as interpreted by Jesus. The story unfolds at the beginning of what we call Holy Week, only in Cotton Patch it is voiced in a southern drawl and vernacular. In this retelling of Jesus’ visit to the Temple and his encounter with the moneychangers, the narrator speaks of Jesus taking a sledge hammer, walking into the courtyard of First Church and calling the leaders there “sons of snakes.” He is beginning to shout at them, “My house shall be known for its commitment to God, but you have turned it into a banker’s club and a religious racket.” Then, says the narrator…

Then the blind people, and the broken people, and the young people started gathering with him into the church, and he was making the needy of them well. He was saying to them, “Come on to me everybody that’s had a belly-full of emptiness. Get in the harness with me. For my harness is practical. My assignment is joy!”

Those words, like the words Jesus first spoke, were echoes of Isaiah’s vision of life under the reign of God. This vision was and is an affirmation of God’s future, of a time when God’s reign will transform life on earth. Despite all those who would claim that people’s lives are expendable, that the poor don’t count, that the day belongs to the strong and not to the weak, that the ones with the most money or power or prestige always win the day, the prophet Isaiah sees the very different future God has in store and

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knows that God is trustworthy, even when mortals are not. This is how life under God’s reign will be, Isaiah says.

Of course, if that is true, then we may also hear these words as judgment upon those of us in the community of faith to whom they are addressed, for Isaiah obviously believes that the community is living in contradiction to what God intends and is bringing to pass. If God’s intention is that the Holy Way be an open way that invites and includes all, then we have work to do to measure up to that intention here and now.

But don’t hear Isaiah’s words only as indictment, for inherent in his words is a gracious invitation. These promises of Isaiah, and their counterparts in the Gospels, have a capacity to draw God’s community into the world that they sketch. Even as judgment falls on the community for being so out of step with God’s intentions, the community finds itself drawn to act and live its life out of that promised future of God. This vision of the end of our exile not only influences us as God’s people; it shapes and forms us, gives us power and impetus, and draws us forward into God’s promised future.

Advent, friends, is a time for us to reflect on the coming of God in holy Mystery, the coming of God into the midst of life’s frailties and imperfections, the coming of God into a world that is itself unclean and lean and unproductive, so as to transform that world into productivity and beauty and grace. Advent is a time for remembering the coming of God to set the human community on its way to wholeness and blessedness, on its way to the healing center of all existence. We are not there yet, but by God’s grace, we are on the way... the Holy Way... the highway of God.

From wilderness to Zion lay
a road that shall be the Lord's highway;
on it will walk the weak and the strong,
and all who by grace to God belong.
Its gates for all will open swing,
the gracious highway of the King.

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5 Harrelson, 255.
6 Harrelson, 256.
7 From hymn text on Isaiah 35, ©Robert Dunham 2001. The hymn is attached.
Isaiah 35 (Tune -- St. Petersburg – “My Song Forever Shall Record”)

The desert blooms with joyous delight,  
and glorious rays turn darkness to light;  
for comes our God, desiring to save,  
to strengthen our hands, our hearts make brave;  
so now we thank with gladsome praise  
the gracious Maker of our days.

The blind in God shall find their sight,  
in hearing shall the deaf delight,  
the lame shall leap with boundless joy,  
the dumb shall tongues of hope employ;  
O exiles, now rejoice and sing,  
and praise before your Savior bring.

From wilderness to Zion lay  
a road that shall be the Lord’s highway;  
on it will walk the weak and the strong,  
and all who by grace to God belong.  
Its gates for all will open swing,  
the gracious highway of the King.

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