

Advent Wisdom: Creating Strength & Beauty

Second Sunday of Advent

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Texts: Isaiah 40.1-1;
 Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13;
 2 Peter 3.8-15a;
 Mark 1.1-8

Have you been following the wild fires in California? The sheer volume of acreage, number of homes destroyed, the people evacuated, and fire fighters on the front lines is mind boggling. As these fires rage through these communities they destroy everything in their path and they move so darn quickly as the wind fuels the flame.

Just last week as we were engaging the prophecy from Isaiah 64 someone shared either in Early Worship or during the bible study in Adult Ed (someone of us engaged those texts last Sunday multiple times over the course of the morning)...in one of those two settings someone shared their experience of being in the Plains region, I think it was, when a wild fire move through the countryside. He described the intensity of that experience. How overwhelming and all-consuming it was as you watched those fires burn everything in its path. It led him to wonder who would ever pray FOR such a thing. Isaiah 64 last week began with the prayer "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood..." As he thought about who would ever pray for such a devastation to be unleashed he realized it was someone in a whole world of pain. The kind of suffocating suffering that comes at the hands of injustice that leaves a person desperate enough to utter that kind of prayer.

Here's the trouble with fire: when it is out of control - when the wind fuels the flame - it destroys everything in its path leaving utter desolation. We know from that kind of fire literally as we watch it unfold in California. And we know from that kind of fire figuratively; the kind that burn across a life without notice leaving nothing but destruction in its path. The

marriage the implodes, the job that disappears, the addiction that consumes everything, the diagnosis that signals the before and after moment of a lifetime. We know from fire that destroys.

One of our texts for today speaks about fire in a different way. 2 Peter caught my attention in a way it never had before precisely around the way the image of fire is used in its teaching. I've long appreciated the perspective of this passage in speaking into the Advent seasons of our life; those times of unbearable waiting and deep longing; reminding us that what we think of as slow may in fact be an element of God's mercy. But it's the next part that struck me as quite fascinating. As the writer imagines the end of time he echoes what we heard last week in the gospel. "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire..."

For a moment it sounds like the writer is imaging the kind of fire we have just named; the kind that destroys everything in its path. The kind you might be tempted to call down to avenge your enemies. But listen to how the phrase concludes: "and the earth and everything that is done on it will be..." What does your mind fill in as the conclusion to that sentence? "will be destroyed"? "Will be laid waste"? If you look at the footnote it has often been translated as "will be burned up." But the NRSV, translates the last word of that sentences as "disclosed." "The earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed." As you look more closely at the literal meaning of this word in Greek it means "it will be discovered."¹

I couldn't help but think about another wild fire burning through our culture right now: the disclosing of abuse all over our country. I'm quite sure that this disclosing of what has been happening behind closed doors feels to the men being held accountable exactly like a fire burning down the life that they have built for themselves. I have a very strong hope and prayer for each of them which is that they will look back on this particular fire as a clarifying disclosure. Honestly, thank God it burned down the walls and doors they were hiding behind. Without those walls – without

¹ Alfred Marshall, The NRSV-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English, (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1990), 682.

the position and power that could demand secrecy, that toxic secrecy – the violence they were perpetrating cannot continue. That is purifying not only for the women (and men in some cases) they preyed upon. It is purifying for their own souls. It forces them to turn around (the meaning of repentance) and to stop it! Or least make that repentance more possible.

Judgment in the hands of God is always about disclosing what we have been blind to see and helping us to discover what is holding us back – what needs to get burned away so that what is faithful and good and life-giving can finally emerge.

Because the heartbeat of our texts for today is a word of comfort. Isaiah 40 opens a new chapter in the life of Israel. Chapter 1-39 are from the 8th century prophet of Isaiah. The theme and tone are one of warning. There are 150 years of silence that stand between the end of chapter 39 and the beginning of chapter 40. And a lot has happened in those intervening years: the rise of the Babylon, the destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple, and the deportation to Babylon.² And then a prophet rises up in the tradition of Isaiah and the very first word from his lips is comfort.

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary talks about the literary device in this passage. The prophet is envisioning God speaking to the “divine council” – the government, if you will - of the heavens that are peopled Brueggemann says by “angels and messengers.” In this “poetic, lyrical vision” as Brueggemann describes it God issues a policy decision here in chapter 40 that is not up for debate. From now on the work of God’s messengers and angels and emissaries is to bring comfort to God’s people.³

If you have been reading the descriptions from Kari Miller-Fenwood from both last week and today about the art she has created for this season you will know that the presence of feathers throughout the series is meant to evoke the image of angels. These emissaries and messengers of God have long been depicted in art with wings made of feathers. It’s meaningful that these agents of God’s presence be adorned by some of the most beautiful

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 15.

³ Brueggemann, 17.

elements of creation. The color and texture of feathers in species of birds from around the world are just stunning. Feathers are also really strong. Strong but also flexible and light weight and agile – able to facilitate flight. All of these dimensions speak to the way that God is present to us. And the red for Kari connected to the image of fire from 2 Peter. The fire that discloses and helps us to discover what needs to fall away and what needs to be embraced or cultivated.

There is Advent wisdom for us in these images from creation. Like the fire that in certain situations runs wild and is nothing but pure destruction; the kind we need to fight with every skill and commitment within us to put the thing out and to contain its damage. But there are other forms of fire that burn but also purify that when used in targeted and controlled ways can bring about a cleansing and a clearing that makes possible new life.

Or take the feathers that evoke images of divine messengers, of angels; all of them symbols for the presence of God among us bringing word and aid and comfort. These images – these elements of creation – they invite us to pay attention and to wonder where there are places that need a cleansing and clearing in order for peace to find a home. Where is God speaking a word of comfort for us or maybe seeking to speak a word of comfort through us?

For while there are a few among us who are gifted with mystical visions of heavenly visitations they are precious few. For the rest of us God's presence is mediated through the elements of the earth and the web of human life. As Isaiah declares today – that web – those elements – they are to be used in bringing comfort to God's people when they are hurting. And by God's people I, of course mean **all** people because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness therein.

But sometimes the work of bringing comfort has to first bring discomfort and therein lies the rub and the need for the John the Baptists of the world. But all of this is in service of one thing which is to bring us to the day when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet" where "righteousness and peace will kiss each other." And to that end in this season of Advent we say: "Come, Lord Jesus!"