

## **Homily - The Coming of Peace**

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**December 10th 2023 - St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Prophecy is the theme of this morning's Scripture readings. Last week it was awaken and peace, but the theme of the second Sunday of Advent is prophecy. Some would say there is no Judeo-Christian concept that is as misunderstood as this one - prophecy.

In popular culture, prophecy is something like fortune telling. It is using a crystal ball to tell the future. It's using tarot cards or reading tea leaves or even reading the lines on the palm of a hand. Somehow popular culture has linked prophecy on the one hand with fortune telling on the other.

Even many Christians hold a similar view. There is a belief that a Christian prophet is shown to be real when his or her prediction comes true. A magical way of thinking has crept into our Christian faith.

And one Christian group, noted for doorbell-ringing, believes that Scripture has 100% percent accuracy in predicting the future. These types of beliefs about prophecy were made very popular in the best-selling "Left Behind" series, a fictional, let me repeat, fictional account of the end-times. Many people have started believing the fiction of the "Left Behind" series and the authors of these books have made millions. The problem with this popular notion is that prophecy in the Scriptures has nothing to do with foretelling. And the Left Behind series has nothing to do with Jesus.

Now, I've shared this before, but the Old Testament of the Bible, or the Hebrew Scriptures are broken into three parts. First we have the Torah or the first five books of the Bible - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Next we have the wisdom books with the Psalms and Proverbs being the best known. Finally, we have the third section of the Hebrew Scriptures, which are the books of the prophets. Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are all books of the prophets. And, so is Isaiah. A few minutes ago we heard a reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

Now, the prophetic books of the Bible are not an attempt to show the future. They are not in any way a depiction of fortune-tellers in action. The prophetic books like Isaiah are much more important than detailed plans of what is to come in the future.

The prophetic books are a cry for people to turn away from their screwed up lives. The prophetic books are telling the folks of 2500 years ago that they are getting it wrong. And by extension, the prophetic books are telling us today that we are getting it wrong too. The prophets used vivid and even violent language to break through the numbness of everyday life so that we will turn about to God.

We all know deep in our hearts that there is more to life, and we all know that we do not love God enough, we do not love other people enough and we do not love ourselves enough. We know we can do better, but our numbness keeps us from taking action.

Far from laying out some program for the future, the prophets of our tradition break through the numbness to proclaim what God is doing now in this present moment.

And, the prophets encourage and even cajole God's people to take an active part in God's work in the world. Or, as I like to say, we are called to be the hands, and feet and voice of Jesus here in the South County.

In today's Gospel reading, John the Baptist functions within this correct model of prophecy. He proclaims God's relentless work in leading people to repentance and wholeness. He proclaims that we are freed from the captivity of selfishness. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is a baptism of renewal and an embrace of a different way of living. It is turning away from those things that separate us from God, others, and self, and turning towards the beauty that is already with us. This is a beauty this is our birthright, given to us by God.

At the same time, John invites hearers to follow our God made flesh. As our Gospel passage says today, life in its fullness is given to us through Jesus, for he will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. Somehow, in ways that we don't fully understand, Jesus makes the universe anew.

All of this is meant to bring comfort to those who were hearing John as he preached on the banks of the Jordan River. Two thousand years ago, many lived in fear. There was fear of the Romans. Fear of violence. Fear of death. And prophets, like Isaiah and John the Baptist, give words to the ugly fears and then they bring words of comfort. Thus we can have peace in our hearts that leads to peace in our world. Using the words of the prophet Isaiah that we have already heard or sung three time this morning...

Comfort, comfort ye my people,  
speak ye peace, thus saith our God;  
comfort those who sit in darkness,  
mourning 'neath their sorrow's load;  
speak ye to Jerusalem of the peace that waits for them;  
tell her that her sins I cover, and her warfare now is over.