

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
Isaiah 61 & John 1
12-17-23

I've got questions, how about you?

Good morning, church family. This Advent, it has been insightful to read the return from exile beside the expectant waiting for Jesus to come. I have been challenged to see how Advent can be a season of lament, where we recognize how the Good News of Jesus is so wonderful because Jesus is responding to real problems. This advent, we have seen darkness so that we can recognize the light. And honestly, I think that the continuing genocide in the Middle East has colored why my reading goes to lament. And yes, I know university presidents are getting fired for taking sides, but I'd rather speak the truth as I see it. The little town of Bethlehem is closed this year. Karl Barth says I should have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our cry for justice and God of vengeance.

Have you ever heard those words from Isaiah somewhere else in the Bible? The spirit of the lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed. Well, if not, time to learn one of Pastor Jon's favorite passages. Luke 4:18-19. This is the part of Isaiah that Jesus reads in his hometown of Nazareth and almost gets thrown off a cliff for saying that he is fulfilling those words.

What's interesting is that Jesus ends his reading of Isaiah with "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" but omits "the day of vengeance of our God." Why? Is this an example of the stereotype of "vengeance is mine" (Deut 32:35), God of the Old Testament, versus the peaceful "whoever lives by the sword, dies by it" (Matt 26:52) Jesus of the New Testament? Many of us love Isaiah for his visions of comfort and peace but would rather do away with the vengeance. And as a good Mennonite minister, I should close the book right now and not seriously talk about vengeance. Right?

The problem with violence is that the missile falls on the headquarters and hospital alike. The freedom fighter rattling his cage kills his jailers and innocent concertgoers alike. When The bible talks about war, especially exile, it uses the language of ruined fields and abandoned buildings. A war-filled world is literally uninhabitable. Looking at the rubble from Kyve to Gaza, I see this is true. So, as people of peace, horrified by the current wars around the world, shall we close the Old Testament and stop reading Isaiah mid-verse like Jesus?

*Brothers and Sisters. I urge you to
Struggle with me.
Question with me.
Rage with me.*

I have not walked in Isaiah's shoes. Nor have I lived in exile or occupation. The Bible, both Old and New Testament, is the story of the lives of God's people. Struggling with God, wrestling like us in a world that is not fair, that is full of darkness. Pray that you will never be in a situation where you pray for God's vengeance.

When Isaiah prays for the day of God's vengeance, if we continue reading, we'll see that the point is comfort for those who mourn in exile and that it is justice to return a property to its ancestral owners. In other words, the people of God want to return home. They wanted to return home to land that was no longer occupied. Land that they could till and work to produce food. Land that some bigger empire would not conquer be it Babylonian, Greek, or Roman.

Let's turn to the New Testament for a moment. The coming of Jesus is good news! Jesus is the messiah, a rescuer. When the religious leaders ask John who he is, they are asking for what they need at that moment. They ask for good news, a light to shine in the darkness. John is annoyingly vague about what that way of Jesus. The point is that Jesus is a mighty rescuer here to enter history as a solution.

What light do we need this Christmas? Peace and goodwill to humankind would be nice. But right now, I will settle for us to walk through this advent season with our eyes wide open. Searching for the light of Jesus in all the places it may be found. In the oppressed crying out for justice. In Jewish, Muslim, and Christian voices for ceasefire and peace. And yes, in our questions and wrestling with uncomfortable Bible texts. Let us witness the light of Jesus.