

Third Sunday in Advent
"Hope Rooted in Faith"

Have you ever experienced a deep hurt or grief
that makes you wonder what kind of world this is?

This week I've been thinking about and praying for the families from Sandy Hook Elementary.
A year ago when this tragedy happened I'm sure they may have wondered, "Where is God in all
this?"

This morning I'd like to begin by taking you to a place where people were asking that same
question...a world seen through the eyes of the prophet, Isaiah.

In 587 B.C. the leaders of Israel's Southern Kingdom were taken into exile.
About 40 years later a prophet promised them that the Lord would lead them back home in a
glorious procession...something like the exodus out of Egypt.

We hear about this procession in today's reading from Isaiah.
In verse, 10, those who returned from exile were called the "ransomed of Israel."
And in this great procession, the exiles would return to Zion on a highway.
Sorrow and sadness would be in the past.

This passage in Isaiah gives us a vision of a time when "the glory of the Lord"
will bring in a new world.

Isaiah tells us that streams of water will break forth in the wilderness,
the desert will produce rich vegetation,
and all those with physical limitations will be healed.

"The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped,
the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing for joy."¹

These restorations are good in themselves,
but they also express the universal joy that will come to all of God's people.

Well, we know from following the history of Israel,
that these exiles were brought back to Palestine.

They did have their land restored to them.
But when they returned,
they didn't find the complete restoration Isaiah envisioned.

¹Isaiah 35:5-6a

Instead of finding Palestine teeming with new life and creation ready to join in God's glory, they found a world still in need of restoration.

During this season of Advent, this time of repentance, waiting, and preparation, we can relate to what Israel experienced.

Upon their return, they had found it difficult to reconcile their hope and dreams with reality. During their exile, they had turned their hearts back to God in repentance, and they had waited patiently and hopefully.

But, upon their return, the restoration they found, was not complete. God had been faithful, and God had never left their side; not during the exile, or during their journey home. But their new world was not quite what they had expected.

So what does this piece of Israel's history have to do with us? Why is it good for us to hear this prophecy from Isaiah 35, only to find out that it was not completely fulfilled?

Well to find our answer we need to look at Jesus' miracles mentioned in today's Gospel reading.

When we hear about the "blind receiving their sight" about the "lame who walk, the lepers who are cleansed, about the deaf who hear, the dead who are raised, and the poor who have good news brought to them,"²

when we hear about these miracles it's important for us to see that Jesus' ministry among us has begun, and at the same time has not yet reached its fulfillment.

With Jesus we have the hope that God is acting on our behalf. God has revealed his love for us through Jesus, and in Christ, God has promised to make all things new.

In Christ, God has promised to usher in His kingdom to renew all of creation, so that "sorrow and sighing will flee away."

But until that day, we still share the experience of the Israelites.

In our repentance, and in our waiting and preparation, we still live in between the times living with a confidence in God's faithfulness, and yet longing for all things to be made new.

²Matthew 11:5-6

I hope you can see why these readings have been chosen for Advent, because Advent, the season of waiting for Christ's return, is a time requiring patience.

In our 2nd reading, we heard James telling these early Christians to be patient. They had been waiting for God's coming a long time.

They had been expecting Jesus to return at any moment, but year after year they were still waiting.

Like the exiles from Israel, their hopeful images had not met up with reality. And James tells them to keep waiting, keep being patient.

We are also waiting.
Each of us, in our own way.
Each of us has experienced the advent of God into our lives- but not completely.

There are still things we need which only God can give.
There is still some pain that won't go away through merely human means,
There is still sin in our lives for which we need a Savior.

And so we wait for God.
And James tells us "be patient."

Somewhat surprisingly, after telling us to "be patient," James says, "As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."³

The prophets?
Are you curious why he mentioned "the prophets"?

Aren't prophets, the ones who have no patience for injustice?

And yet, patience may be exactly what a prophet needs.
If someone wants to see things changed, in a deep, and abiding way, that takes patience.

For example, parenting takes patience.
Sometimes parents can't wait to see things go well for their children.
Yet, sometimes when parents become impatient, determined to take matters into their own hands, to step in, take charge, and work things out for their children, it can be a mistake.
There are few shortcuts to adulthood. It takes time.

³James 5:10

We often settle for quick fixes, and short-term solutions, rather than true change.
In his Letter to the Romans⁴ Paul asks,

"Where would we be if God were not patient,
if God were unwilling to let us fail, stumble, and eventually grow toward him?"

God has infinite patience for each of us!

So maybe James is right.
We ought to remember the prophets who remembered God...and were patient.

Prophets spoke out because they had their eyes fixed,
not on the immediate situation, but on the future.

They kept talking about the coming reign of God,
even when they had no immediate evidence because they had patience,
a patience born of their conviction that God would act,
that God cared, and that God would move toward his people with love.

Christian patience, is just like that.
It is a quiet, but bold confidence that God will act.
That God cares, that God will move toward his people with love.

Like we talked about on Wednesday night at our Advent service,
patience is a byproduct of hope, which comes from faith.

In Colombia, my dad worked with another missionary who was originally from the country of Latvia. We were in Colombia from 1964 until 1972 and one of the things Victor, this Latvian missionary told us about, were the harsh conditions that Christians in Latvia endured, under their Communist oppressors.

Yet the day Communism lifted its grip on Latvia,
as if out of nowhere, Christian communities sprang into being.
All those years, fifty, terrible, dark years,

Christians had been secretly celebrating their faith,
teaching their young, witnessing, praying.
All those years.

"How in God's name were you able to do it," one Latvian Christian was asked?
"Well," he replied, "fifty years is a long time, but it's not an eternity.
We always managed to take the long view."

⁴ Romans 9:22

Nelson Mandela, as he waited in prison 27 years, also took the long view.

That's a hopeful word for us today.

No matter what circumstances in life we end up facing, we know that God will sustain us.

We know that no period of loss or tragedy is beyond God's capacity to bring us through.
We, who hope in Christ, have been called to be patient.

Patience comes from hope, rooted in faith.

Hope in a God who never fails us.

Stir up your power O Lord and come. Amen.