

Lent Wantings

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 3-5
Date: February 21, 2021

INTRODUCTION

At Christmas we light Advent candles to remind us of the light of the world coming into the world in Jesus Christ. In Epiphany we remember the light that is living and growing within us and through us. Normally in Lent the light is extinguished – bit by bit - reminding us of the darkness at Good Friday and of the us of the sin within us. However, this year we've had enough darkness in our world and we're going to look at Easter as the dawn of light – again with a new start – a new beginning.

But like many things in life – this journey takes time. Very little in life is instantaneous and it is developed, nurtured grown. A journey that is founded in the idea of hope – hope that we looked at last week. A hope that there is more / better for us and a hope that breathes life into faith.

A PLACE

The Isaiah text today begins a different part of Isaiah. Most commentators would agree that chapters 1-39 were written by Isaiah himself and are filled with warnings from God to Israel through Isaiah about their obedience and faith in Him. However, there is a shift in chapter 40. A shift in linguist nature – indicating the possibility of a different author – and a shift in emphasis. The chapters 1 to 39 speak of a tone where it is about a prophecy of Israel's fall from grace and chapters 40 to 66 speak of a tone where Israel has been punished for its sins and is now in exile in Babylon.

In this place Israel has been forced from their homes, their shops, their families and the temple in Jerusalem has been ransacked and destroyed and their capital city has been ruined and burned to the ground. They are a captured people, an enslaved people who are living in a foreign land with foreign gods amongst foreign people.

The text today in vs. 3-5 alludes to the challenges they face. They are in a wilderness – a desert – which holds images of a place without cities or communities, a place with limited shelter and a place with limited resources. They are in a place with rugged places and rough ground which make it hard to move around and make it hard to settle down.

They are a people needing hope and faith. They are a people needing a reminder that God was still around them and that God was still interested in them. While they were a people still clinging to the old 'normal' they were also still a people needing to be reminded of their identity as God's chosen people – a holy people.

We are a culture that seeks things out – Amazon, Google etc. drives our search engines and give us options for what we might want in life. We create shopping lists and to do lists to help guide

us forward in our lives. But Covid has altered that space significantly and many have become aware of their deeper needs – wants – desires. While there remains a want to return to ‘normal’ with church attendance and singing without masks etc. There is a growing awareness that our needs are deeper than this.

We see our own exile and wilderness as we feel separated and isolated - from each other, from God and even from our own purpose – direction – in life. We feel like we’re wandering in the midst of an unknown wilderness with a checklist of wants but no way to accomplish them.

So we journey – a journey of faith and hope. For many the power of Lent is found in sacrifice. They sacrifice giving up parts of their lives such as chocolate, coffee, television, social media etc. Others sacrifice not by giving up but by taking on. Perhaps taking on more prayer, more bible reading or more serving of others.

Regardless – both checklists become a grading system of success. I can check this off – I’ve accomplished this etc. But truthfully these ‘sacrifices’ lack a power to achieve anything. My father used to always carry around a notepad jotting down notes of things to do and crossing off the things that got done. The interesting thing is that I’ve looked at his notepads and many are filled with items that were never accomplished. Not because he was lazy – on the contrary – but with the reality that checking off a list is always not going to be enough because there is always going to be more things to do.

Our place in the wilderness is filled with a lack of direction and a lack of power. What is needed – what is wanted – what is desired – in order to get out of the wilderness it to be restored / redeemed by an outside power and purpose.

A PROMISE

God desires to deliver Israel FROM their predicament and He desires to deliver Israel TO their God. God promised a deliverance – a redemption - vs. 3-5 that the rugged and rough places will become level so that it becomes easier to navigate. That the valleys – or the lows in life – will become easier to move through and that the highs mountains or obstacles will become possible to move beyond.

We can find comfort and reassurance from the truths God gave to the nation of Israel as we are reminded that God also wants to restore us - from our sinful ways and to help us focus more on Christ and less on the culture around us.

And God speaks into that need in verse 5 with a promise that He WILL deliver it. The glory of God will be revealed so that all people will see it. God states that it WILL happen because it’s what HE wants for us !

Psalm 23: 1 in the older NIV translation speaks of how we shall not be in want anymore. We will lack for no good thing because God IS the good thing.

God is not only promising that this return / restoration WILL happen but that HE will make it happen. The text today speaks of a way that will be created for this restoration to occur. A straight way that eliminates obstacles and a highway that is for all who travel or journey towards redemption and restoration. A way to our home with God.

A PROCESS

Verses are words quoted by John the Baptist in Luke 3: 4-6 that foreshadow the coming of Jesus Christ as a shepherd AND as a King. That Jesus would bring restoration through His earthly teaching, through His death on the cross, through His resurrection from the grave and even now through His role at the right hand of the Father - interceding on our behalf.

God speaks to Israel – and us – with a promise that He is not absent from our situation and that He will walk with us through our situation. Verse 3 speaks of a voice of one calling into the wilderness. God – through the Holy Spirit – continues to call us in our wilderness. A call to return – to journey – to Him.

Matthew 6: 33 reminds us that our first want is to seek first God's kingdom and all else will be added to our lives. Psalm 27: 4 reminds us to seek the Lord and to dwell in His presence. In this truth our wants will be celebrated as the mesh with God's calling and desire for us to be aligned with His Spirit and His Kingdom living. This journey is not just for us alone either. We are called in the Lenten journey of increasing light to share this light of life and this journey of faith.

We can become distracted in our checklists of stuff in our lives rather than then the need of salvation for our lives. We can become distracted in wanting rules to live our lives rather than the need of a relationship with the One who makes the rules.

This Lenten journey is a recognition of our wants – a want that God is first and foremost in our lives. A journey that won't happen instantly but will grow deeper and richer each and every step we take and each and every day we live.

AMEN