

3rd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.13.20

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light...This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (515)

The third Sunday of Advent: now we're just stalling, don't you think? With this, another introduction to John the Baptizer, whom we met in this same way last Sunday: now it sort of feels like we're dithering until the four weeks are finally up and we can finally celebrate Christmas. Even John himself feels like he's dithering: "Are you Elijah?" No, not that. "Are you the prophet?" No, not that either. Get to it, man! Who or what are you?

A voice. He is a voice crying out in the wilderness. Prepare! Make straight the way of the Lord!

But isn't that what he said last week?

Seven days have passed. What did they get us?

A few years ago, I went on a trip to Central Europe with my family, immediate and extended—a guided trip overland that included a few days in Budapest. A building we drove past on our way to a more significant site, nothing special, apartments maybe: it had damage done to it. The plaster a few stories up was pocked black in one place. The guide pointed it out, that it was damage done during the war.

What war, you wonder if you're like me.

The Second World War—which, if you're like me, you do the math: 80 years ago?!

They would get to fixing this, eventually. But there was damage like this throughout the city, little injuries in old, ordinary buildings. Cities like this, old cities, are filled with old ordinary buildings. And I mean *old*. They were working on fixing them.

I found this amazing. I think I even said to someone, though maybe just to myself, "They operate on a different timescale over here." But that makes sense, right? Hungary was founded about the year 800, so is about 1200 years old. For them, operating on that timescale, that pock just happened—and they would get to it, eventually.

I think a lot about that pockmark. I think about it a lot during Advent, when we're operating on a different timescale, when what we're waiting for calls us into a different experience of time—where the past is present and also future, as we wait for a thing that's already occurred, which makes waiting an act of remembrance while also of anticipation for that occurrence to happen again, though this time with some finality, with some lasting fulfillment.

That true Christmas, that true and lasting Christmas morning, which will never turn to Christmas afternoon, when you pick up and put things away and wonder, how many cinnamon buns did you *actually* eat.

That final feast will have us never hungry again. Most feasts, no matter how fabulous: you're hungry again a few hours hence.

A final fulfillment.

It was last week's reading that reminded us that the Lord isn't slow about his promise the way some people think of slowness, but is patient, going about the act of salvation patiently amidst history, though moving toward some lasting final fulfillment.

It's happening.

It's happening.

That was in the letter of Peter, which is one of the latest written books of the New Testament, when the timescale of the church was slowly being revealed. Christ would return, but not in the timescale those of the earliest days had anticipated. Christ would return, but maybe not even in the mode that those in the earliest days had imagined. Indeed, among them perhaps stood that one, yet whom they didn't know, didn't recognize, the one who was yet to come—yet there he was, already among them.

Where?

Which ordinary person? Which unremarkable face is the face of God? Which unremarkable body is the abode of the Lord's spirit?

That's John, of course, speaking: "Among you stands one whom you do not know." That's John, the herald of the Messiah promising, "the one who is coming after me."

It's also John who was writing this, the latest of the gospels.

These were two different Johns, so it's confusing, I'll grant you. There's John the baptizer, the character, the herald of the Messiah, and more mundanely the cousin of Jesus. There's John the evangelist, the writer or, even more accurate to say, the book for who knows who actually wrote it?

This is a book we'll hear from a lot this year as addenda to the very short Gospel of Mark. Every year we follow one of the three synoptic gospels, these which are synopses of Jesus' life. This, year B, when we follow Mark's synopsis, will have us take in additional material from John, which isn't a synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry, is more of an exploration of Jesus' nature and significance. We take it as filler for Mark's brief story and his sudden Jesus. In Mark, we see Jesus' effect. In John, we wonder at how this effect comes to be—how and why, how and why?

In the beginning, is where John would have us begin. When it comes to Jesus, we must begin in the beginning. Taking in the full grandeur of God, taking into account the full creative

power and gracious outpouring of God is the essential first step for coming to terms with Christ, with Jesus.

By this, John establishes his timescale—among other things. By this, John implies we should still ourselves and get comfortable for this story is a long one and we're but in the middle. But we shouldn't get so comfortable as not also to be full of expectation, because we don't actually know how soon comes the end. Maybe now.

Maybe now, in this moment.

And again, in this moment.

This is a long story, and it meets its end all the time—so get comfortable and be full of anticipation.

It's a challenging posture to keep.

We're getting our practice at it now.

Remember when we thought the quarantine would last two weeks? As if a pandemic could be cleared up in fourteen days. As if an incredibly contagious novel virus could be stopped in a fortnight. I sometimes look back on that and am astonished at what fools we were. What did we think could be done about a problem of this scale in less time than it takes the tailor to hem your pants and get them back to you ready to wear? Honestly.

I think this is our biggest mistake when it comes to reading scripture. We forget the timescale at work in the creation of the scriptures. We forget the timescale at play in the lives of its characters. Joseph planned for surviving drought, and seven years later the drought had passed. Sarah prayed for a son, and seventy years later one was born to her. Isaiah supposed there would be a singular figure, one anointed of God, which is to say a messiah, whose coming would amount to good news for the poor and liberty for the oppressed. And five hundred years later the gospel writers saw all this in Jesus. Five hundred years, they were willing and able to remember in hope. Who does that?

The fact that written witness to these events are often but a verse, maybe a chapter, doesn't help us. The Bible is grand in its brevity, quickness about its long business. The events of the sixty-six books of the Bible span 2500 years, the writing of the books span 1200 years. Too bad, then, that our practice, our religious observance, often demands a God who moves evidently, obviously

at the speed of the industrial age, now the internet age. Go especially to any evangelical church, and you'll hear declared a God who's ready to do your bidding by the end of the day.

No surprise, this is a particular problem of the American church. I imagine the Hungarian church is a little more patient—though God knows they have other problems there.

As for the book of Isaiah, its sixty-six chapters come to us from a timespan of about 150 years.

Where we are today, with Third Isaiah, we're late in that span. With First Isaiah, the once stable United Kingdom of Israel and Judah was teetering, toppling. Israel had already fallen to Babylon. Next, would be Judah, and with it the capital, Jerusalem, and with that the Temple, the city's beating heart, the *people's* beating heart.

First Isaiah sensed it coming.

Second Isaiah had seen it come, and meant now to speak words of comfort and discipline to a people humiliated, bewildered, and made alien even to themselves.

As for Third Isaiah, here was promised restoration, resettling in the land and rebuilding the city, the kingdom. There would be a binding of the brokenhearted and liberty for the oppressed. There would be a building up of long-ago ruins and a raising up of former devastations. It would happen—and if not within the lifetimes of those now hearing it then likely in the lifetimes of their offspring, or their offspring's offspring.

And who knows if such a thing came easier to them than it might to us? Who knows if those then living could hold in their imaginations the likelihood that this promise would come to fulfillment though in perhaps a far-off future? Or would they have felt that within their lifetimes was long enough to have to wait, thank you very much—and even sooner would be better. Maybe, like, fourteen days?

What John seemed to be promising—both the character (John the baptizer, Jesus' cousin) and the written (John the gospel, perhaps written by some John an evangelist)—wasn't just an event to occur within history, even if on some grand historic scale. What John (and John) were promising was an event of the whole cosmos, an occurrence of God's fullness, this though in time.

And here's what's astonishing: Jesus would be that very thing—that fullness, that utter presence. In and with the man, Jesus, it would happen, God would occur.

And so, we wait.

So, we wait for something that has already happened.

Wait, why do we do this?

When Jack was about three years old, he asked from his car seat, which I could see in my rearview mirror, about that time when that thing happened. But his description of it was obscured by his toddler pidgin English—and I couldn't remember even a scrap of what he was describing. Driving along, passing now High Lawn Farm, I asked him to repeat it, to try saying it a different way. He did, but I still wasn't getting it. There was a blue animal or something. Maybe a stuffed animal? No, it was alive. And it was blue. And the fuzz. And it ran in a funny way.

The more he described it the more I had the feeling I was in a dream—so I asked him, “Was this a dream?” not sure he would know the distinction.

“Yes,” he said, which had me explain that I don't know his dreams.

“But you were there,” he said.

So, what to make of that?

As it happens, trouble for Jack often gets organized around his sometimes inability to distinguish between his memory and his imagination, so people think he lies—teachers, friends. I don't think it's that.

The human mind is a marvel. Memory, imagination, hope, manifestation. Longing, waiting, praying, fulfillment. I don't believe in magic. But I don't go along with the modern insistence that the world be understood as disenchanted either.

We wait during Advent for an occurrence that's already happened because it draws us into a simple fact about our lives—that we long for a fulfillment which, once we receive, will have us soon enough back in state of longing. This is in some way where we spend the bulk of our lives, longing for fulfillment, longing for fulfillment—and it is love that makes any fulfillment on the offer.

A mother feeds her baby. A father presents his children with something from their wish-list. A friend gives a friend a ride to the airport. A spouse gives her partner breakfast on the go when that partner is late for work. A researcher leans over microscopes, computer modeling, so much data, and, lo! comes a breakthrough, and a new way forward. Love is what makes any such longing come to fulfillment. Love is what makes any need to be met with the assurance and

fullness. We wait during Advent to practice our longing, and to have reminded to us, once again, that God is love, that God is fulfillment.

And it takes time, this practice of waiting, this assurance that our longing comes to fullness and peace. It takes time.

So, we take our time. Four weeks. Forever. All the way to everlasting.

Thanks be to God.