



## Isaiah in Advent: The Transforming Word\*

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As our group gathered to examine the Isaiah texts for Advent 1, 2, and 3 in series B, we were disgruntled at the outset about several matters. First, here was Isaiah yet again. If one were to read only the prescribed lectionary texts, one would think that Isaiah constituted at least half of the Old Testament. Second, the assigned texts were dreadfully dissected—two of the pericopes were missing their middle verses; and the first began in the middle of a section, in the middle of a verse, and ended with the first verse of a new thought. The reasoning behind such bizarre lectionary decisions escaped us. Finally, the assignment of the pericopes to the Sundays of Advent was not done according to literary and historical order, presumably robbing the Old Testament of the integrity of its own witness. We were not pleased.

Yet as we began our conversation, after a calming and directive word of prayer, an amazing transformation took place. The study of Scripture cut through our objections and began to demand our attention. Each text was found to have its own word to offer to the experience of Advent. One offers lamentation, one the beauty and directness of the promise, and one hope for all the world. Together, if given a chance to exert their power, these Isaiah texts help to mold, inform, and define Advent.

\*This essay was written after conversations with Pastor Susan Peterson of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, and Professors Randolph Nelson and Daniel Simundson of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary.

### 1. *Isaiah 63:16b-17; 64:1-8.*

Usually we think of Advent as a time of patient, hopeful waiting for the joyous event of Christmas. At that time, God comes to us as a little child. Now we wait. Then God comes. All is right with the world. Such is not the stage set by this text from Isaiah, especially when coupled with the text from Mark 13. In Mark we are instructed to watch for the violent, earthshaking coming of the Son of Man. If we are not watchful, we might be caught unaware and unprepared. Here in Isa 63-65 a community lament sets a similar, somber stage for Advent. This lament sets Advent in the context of a real world in which things are not going well. The world is not a perfect place; people are disillusioned.

In the historical context of third Isaiah, this lament is voiced after the time of restoration from the exile. All hopes were pinned on that return. Coming home to Jerusalem was going to mean the end of all Israel's shame and discontent. However, things did not turn out so well. Problems multiplied rather than disappeared; ugliness and evil continued to exist. In many ways, their situation resembles ours. Our hopes are pinned on the fact that Christ has come; the promise

has been fulfilled. But life somehow remains imperfect. The problems of the world persist and we are not all that we should be.

So we begin Advent with a lament; but how do we lament? We remind God of his status as father and redeemer (63:16b). Would not such a God take care of us, protect us not only from our enemies but also from ourselves and our own proclivity towards sin? We accuse God of causing us to err, of “hardening our hearts,” of treating us like Pharaoh rather than like a beloved child (63:17a). Yet in the midst of such complaint, still we call on God to come. Come for the sake of the relationship, for we are your heritage (63:17b).

The call is not to come as a child, as “God with us,” but to come in power, in theophanic splendor. The coming is described in 64:1-3 with all the traditional language of theophany. These verses, difficult to translate accurately because of the corrupt nature of verses 1-5, call on the Lord to come as mountains quake, fires burn, and nations tremble. Here is a God so terrible that a mere glimpse of his visage might cause death. Such is the God for whom we wait. In the midst of such a call, itself expressed in the midst of lament, we are brought face to face with the realization of our own sin and we confess:

Behold, thou wast angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away...for thou hast hid thy face from us and hast delivered us into the hands of our iniquities. (64:5b-7 RSV)

With this confession, wishing for God’s presence is shown to be an ambiguous desire. The call for God’s advent is now characterized by holy fright because along with theophany comes the consciousness of sin. Such awesome waiting, marked by the fear of the Lord, cuts through the comfortable assurance of a peaceful advent which holds only cheer. The day of the Lord’s coming is also a day of judgment and righteousness.

Advent is suitably begun by this lament. Redemption makes little sense to such a needful world if it comes without power. Waiting marked by lamentation and confession poses a challenge to how we understand incarnation. The *Lord* comes to be with us. Shall we not tremble? Is not this waiting tinged with fear? God,

our Father, molds and owns us (64:8). Is such divine control good news or bad? One thirsts for the refreshing waters of faith and promise. A confessional stance engages the world where we are. Advent is ushered in by an awesome antiphon:

O come, O come, great Lord of might,  
Who to your tribes on Sinai’s height  
In ancient times once gave the law  
In cloud, and majesty, and awe.

## 2. *Isaiah 40:1-11.*

The voice which calls to us from Isa 40:1-11 differs radically from the voice of

lamentation. Here instead comfort is proclaimed through the announcement of the dramatic reversal of the fortunes of God's people. The change in message could be attributed to the different historical circumstances of these two passages. The first passage was addressed to disheartened returnees, dismayed by the failure of hopes associated with the return from exile. Isa 40 is addressed to people still in exile who have not yet experienced that particular disillusionment. Still, in the circumstances of exile, they could and do even more readily lament. They were, as they often sang, exiles in a foreign land with little cause for rejoicing. What in fact marks Isa 40 as different from Isa 63-64 is not so much centered in the altered circumstances as it is in the change produced by the power and intention of God to reverse those circumstances through the transforming Word of promise. With Isa 40 hope is infused into Advent.

The word here is stunning. The word is stunning in its beauty and artistry, which even of itself inspires and moves. Many Christians, of course, hear these verses almost automatically through the music of Handel's Messiah. But even without the music the poetry sings. The passage is marked by a continual, four-fold calling. The first call or "cry" demands a word of comfort to Jerusalem. The demand is found in the plural, presumably calling on all the angelic hosts of heaven to bestow comfort. Two wonders are proclaimed—the war is over, and Israel's sin is pardoned, "for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." With this word the experience of exile is transformed. The exile is no longer seen as pure divine retribution; rather the exile has potential value for divine redemption.

The second call, a lone crying voice, invites the exiles to relive once again the journey of the Exodus. This time the trip will be easy, like crossing the rocky mountains on a super highway, for the very earth will be transformed. This new trip will be a return home in which "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed," not because of the altered earth, but rather because of the source of its alteration—"The mouth of the LORD has spoken." The Word is declared.

The third call is the most direct and contains within it a response from the one who is called. "What shall I call?" says the prophet, who then proceeds to describe the world as would plain sight, human experience, and common sense. The world is not transformed; people still die—"all flesh is grass"—and reprieve is only temporary—"the flower fades." Here the same perception of the world is heard as in the confession of Isa 64. The voice agrees—the grass *does* wither and the flower *does* fade. This call does not deny the world. But, the voice concludes, reality consists of more than what plain sight and common sense can perceive. Reality is informed

and shaped above all by the eternal, everlasting, transforming Word of God. For those who have ears to hear, this Word defines reality.

Such a claim stands at the heart of this word of comfort, at the heart of all of second Isaiah: the very speaking of this word of comfort transforms the reality. The exiles, and we who would hear this word with them, are invited to reimagine the world on the basis of this proclaimed, poetic vision. The power of this invitation is forcefully described by Walter Brueggemann:

The very act of poetic speech establishes a new reality. Public speech, the articulation of alternative scenarios of reality, is one of the key acts of a ministry

among exiles....This theology of the word refers to a sense that there is an indefatigable agency at work in the historical process that takes its own free course and has its decisive say without conforming to the power and processes of the day.<sup>1</sup>

This is a word of comfort which defies logic and marks Advent as a period which redefines reality.

The fourth call of Isa 40 is a word to the city of Jerusalem as she awaits the return of her exiled children. The city itself peers out into the desert and proclaims to the other cities of Judah not merely the return of the exiles, but the theophanic return of their victorious Lord. Just as in Ps 24 where the very gates of the temple lift their heads so that the strong and mighty King of Glory may enter, so here Jerusalem espies the Lord God coming with might, his strong arm ruling, and the exiles, his reward and recompense, round about him. Once again the vision itself is transformed. For the warfare indeed is ended, and the mighty warrior quickly becomes the shepherd leading his flock. The arm of power becomes the loving arms which gather the flock. Israel and we with her are here led gently into the future with our young. We are cradled by the Word.

With this transformation from warrior to shepherd, Advent is transformed from lament to hope. The instrument of the transformation is the very Word of God. In truth such transformation even continues as the text of comfort from Isa 40 is modulated and redefined in Mark, where one finds what some have called the classic “mistranslation” of an Old Testament text by the New. Accordingly, Mark presumably misunderstands the Isaiah text, which calls on all the hosts to prepare a way for a new Exodus within the wilderness, and speaks rather of a voice in the wilderness which cries for the preparation of a new way. Yet perhaps the misunderstanding is ours, not Mark’s. Just as the mighty arm of the warrior becomes the gentle arm of the shepherd, so now the anonymous voice of Isaiah becomes the specific voice of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Savior of the world. This transformation of the meaning carries the promise into our experience of Advent. Through Christian imagination we do not collapse the two texts, but neither do we separate Isaiah from Mark. The Word becomes flesh.

O Come, O come Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “Second Isaiah: An Evangelical Rereading of Communal Experience,” in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, ed. C. Seitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 75, 80.

### 3. *Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11.*

In many ways Isa 61 continues the mode of Advent established in Isa 40. Again we hear a word of promise and proclamation the underlying message of which is transformation. Historically, this passage belongs once more to third Isaiah. Yet, unlike Isa 63-64, the vision of second Isaiah continues to hold sway. Isa 61 in fact depends literally on the vision and self-identification of that former prophetic voice. The definition of the servant as one chosen to

bring justice to the nations and salvation to all the earth is rooted in remembrance of the words of Isa 42:1-4 and 49:1-6. The job of this latter prophet is less to proclaim a new word and more to proclaim the old word anew, that is, to reiterate and reassure folk that the promises still hold true.<sup>2</sup>

The scope of the promises of Isa 61 is markedly broadened, however, from that of Isa 40. The message is no longer limited to the exiles. The proclamation is addressed both to the people of Israel and through them to the nations. The transformations announced by Isa 61 mark a universal reversal and a manifestation of justice and comfort to all the world. The Good News is directed to the afflicted, to the poor (61:1b). All suffering is reversed; the brokenhearted are bound up; the captives are liberated (61:1c). Time itself is redefined. The year of Jubilee is proclaimed, and the theophanic day of judgment, so life-threatening in Isa 64, now brings comfort to those who mourn (61:2). Even the songs of lament, like the one which ushered in Advent, are now to be clothed in “the mantle of praise.” The people of Israel shall receive a new name, “Oaks of Righteousness, the planting of the LORD.”

By skipping over verses 4-9, the lectionary draws attention to the connections between verses 10-11 and verse 3 by which the promise to Israel is given an individual realization. As such, we who are Christians cannot help but look towards the incarnation so soon to be celebrated. We know that Jesus quotes Isa 61:1-2 when he first addresses the synagogue in Galilee and makes their words his own (Luke 4:18-19). In Isa 61:10 the prophet responds,

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord  
my soul shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.

Moreover, the tree of Israel which is the Oak of Righteousness does not grow only for its own benefit. The prophet continues,

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what it sown in it  
to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring forth before all the nations. (61:11)

Do we hear this as Good News? To be sure, this transformation is for the benefit of all the nations. Yet echoes of the fear-filled confession in Isa 64 might well be heard by some, for the announcement that this advent is for all the world is not

<sup>2</sup>R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1975) 240.

received by all people as good news. The folk in Galilee were not at all moved to praise by Jesus’ words. This promise, however, insures that righteousness will be married to praise. The prisoners will be free and God’s justice will be done. The power and the Word comes from God, for God will cause this tree to spring forth.

We who are in Advent can only wait. In our waiting, if we have ears to hear, we are swept up by the gospel, by the promise of God's Word, and we can offer praise. For the Word *is* for the nations, and for that good news praise is now in order.

O Come, Desire of nations, bind  
In one the hearts of humankind;  
Bid thou our sad divisions cease,  
And be, Thyself, our King of peace.

This year in Advent, we wish for all people in the church the opportunity to share in some in-depth study of these words of Isaiah. If these passages are merely read, they have little chance to operate as the Word of God in our lives. If, however, these passages are discussed, debated, struggled with, and preached, they will become part of the shaping of our experience of awaiting the coming of Christ, as through and with these words the Good News is heard and proclaimed. Thanks be to God.