

Homily on Isa 40,1-5, 9-11

December 10, 2017

Intro: God comes to us in astonishing ways in our most difficult times. In 587 the Babylonian kingdom conquered Judah, razed the temple, took away its sacred objects (including the Ark of the Covenant) and deported the leaders of the people to Babylon. There, without the Temple's sacrifice and the presence of their God in the Ark, they concentrated on studying, and indeed putting together, the Bible. They became the purified and observant People of the Book. But their hope for a return to Jerusalem was bleak. But, miraculously, the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon and in 538 he allowed the exiles to return home. The Jews considered Cyrus a servant of God and their return across the steppes into Jerusalem is the theme of today's first reading.

Isaiah here gives an oracle from God describing the return of the Babylonian exiles in poetic language. God tells the prophet to comfort his people with the realization that the punishment for their sins is complete. An angelic voice instructs the people to level the mountains and fill in the valleys so as to make a superhighway in the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem. On this highway Yahweh will lead his people home, in a deliverance like his leading his people through the desert from Babylon to the Promised Land. All nations will see this deliverance and the glory of the Lord's triumphant redemption of his people will be revealed.

Then the scene shifts to Jerusalem itself. Their watchmen are to climb up a high mountain to witness this triumphant return. Their good news is to tell Jerusalem that their God is coming to them with power, leading his flock like a shepherd. His strength is matched by his tenderness, as he carries the weak like a shepherd carrying a lamb on his chest. The Lord is the good shepherd, always caring for his people in exile and now leading them to their home. It is a magnificent image of God. Make it your image of God this Advent.

This oracle of God is fulfilled in 538 with the return of the first exiles from Babylon. But most Old Testament prophecies have many fulfillments. Mark's gospel gives us a second fulfillment. John the Baptist is a voice crying in the desert, now asking the people to make straight their lives to prepare for the Lord Jesus who will come to shepherd his people. They are to raise the valleys and level the hills of their own lives, so as to let in the mighty one who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. The Baptist is pointing to the Messiah's life, death, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Make this your image of Jesus this Advent.

But the oracle is fulfilled a third time for Mark's readers. Jesus has come to them to pour out his Holy Spirit in baptism and so they have known the Lord Jesus as the shepherd who has led them to their own deliverance from their bondage to sin.

The Meaning for us: Christians from every nation have experienced the fulfillment of this prophecy in their own lives. They have been delivered from their bondage to sin through their reliance in faith on the Good Shepherd who has baptized them with his Holy Spirit and fed them with his Body and Blood.

So what has happened to the Jews in the 6th century before Christ, and happened to the Jews of Jesus' own lifetime and happened to the Christians of Mark's community, and has happened to countless Christians in the past 2000 years, can happen to you, as well.

Some of us are enslaved to powerful addictions---to alcohol, to drugs, to pornography. I myself have seen people delivered from these addictions through their faith in the healing power of Jesus and His Holy Spirit. All of us have lesser addictions---to any of the capital sins, like pride, sloth, lust, anger, and, especially in our culture, envy, covetousness, greed. We all have lesser addictions---to our sense of entitlement, to small pleasures, to our need

to be in control, to our preference to talk rather than listen.

Most destructive of all is our unwillingness to believe that Jesus has either the power or the will to heal us. Why me? Why not me?

Advent is the season of hope that God is coming in power. Not just 20 centuries ago, but now, in my life. This advent, bring your addiction before the Lord, ask for his healing in your insistent private prayer, and in every sacrament you receive. In your prayer, "Get up on a high mountain; cry out at the top of your voice, 'Here is your God; he comes with power. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock and carries the lambs in his bosom.'"

Rejoice!