

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2009  
SCRIPTURES: Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:21-39  
“The Power of God”

Even though the Old Testament and Gospel passages from today’s lectionary readings have little in common in their content (one is a prophesy of strength and the other a display of Christ’s healing and power), there are distinct similarities between the two passages in context, in the environment in which the two pieces are written. The Old Testament passage comes from the first chapter of the second major division of the book of Isaiah, division so great that many scholars refer to chapters forty through sixty-six as “Second Isaiah”. The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah were written during the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, a time when the Southern Kingdom of Judah was also threatened. It was also the beginning of the rise of Babylon to great power in the east. Chapter forty and all that follows was clearly written after the fall of the entire region to Babylon and the deportation of thousands people from Judah. Although we do not know whether the author of this second section of Isaiah writes from Babylon or is still among the remnant left behind in Judah, it is obvious that he is aware of the full scope of the situation. Jerusalem has been destroyed as have many if not most of the major towns of Palestine. Great sections of the population are living in exile and those not in exile are completely bereft of any social, economic, political or even religious base. Despair and disillusionment are rampant as all that the Children of Abraham saw as divine guarantees were taken from them. The temple in Jerusalem was in ruins and the Davidic throne was no more.

The passage from the gospel Mark is set in a similar climate. After a brief but glorious time known as the Maccabean Period in which Judah enjoyed relative independence and freedom and a tremendous cultural surge, the Romans have moved in with a brutal occupation of the region. In the time of Jesus most of what we would call “infrastructure” was left intact and even improved with the construction of roads and buildings and even whole communities, but the political, economic and even social climate was shot through with corruption and inequality; with the occupying Romans and a few select families such as the Herodians living in sumptuous excess while the vast majority of the population wallowed in abject poverty with almost no power or rights.

In both passages though it was obvious that something new was afoot, yet in its newness there was also history. Isaiah proclaims the word of God saying, “Have you not known? Have

you not heard?” hinting that his news has always been there. Yet people are quoted as saying, “My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded.” Mark has the people of Capernaum realizing that the basis of the teaching of Jesus is familiar, but amazed at the teaching itself, for it is unlike anything that they have ever heard or experienced. In fact Jesus’ teaching goes beyond instruction to direct acts of power over evil and the ability to bring healing and wholeness to those who are broken. Again, in both cases what was brought to a people who were beset with trials and discouraged was a new proclamation and demonstration of the power of God. When the people of Capernaum proclaim in the Gospel of Mark, “a new teaching!” the original Greek does not translate the word new as “modern” or new as opposed to old, and it is definitely not saying new as in “stylish” or “popular”, but rather new as in “unprecedented”, “unheard of” or “never before experienced”.

A greater reading of the Bible tells us clearly that what the people were looking for and expecting, both in the days of Isaiah and in the days of Christ, was a return to the way things had once been; to the old ways and the old life of times gone by, ways that had been made ever more glowing by nostalgia. What Isaiah proclaimed though, and what Mark recorded in his Gospel was that while there is nothing wrong with remembering past with fondness, the past was over and gone, and that the people of God must live in the present. The second message of the texts is, of course, that the power of God always comes to God’s people in new and fresh and different ways so that God’s people can live in the present and work toward the future.

Friends, every age has periods of struggle and periods of peace, periods of hardship and periods of relative ease, periods of equality and justice and periods of injustice. And let us never forget that a period that might be peaceful and prosperous for some can be a period of horror for others. I’m sure for instance that the elite of Babylon would have seen the time when the Israelites were crying out that their way was hidden from their God as a time of peace and plenty, just as the Herodians would have seen no need for salvation in the time Christ as did the vast majority of the people of Judah and Galilee.

The good news for the people to whom Isaiah proclaimed the word of God, the good news for the people who heard the new teaching of Jesus and were healed by God’s power received through his word and touch, the good news for you and for me and for everyone beset by strife and struggles and uncertainty in this current period and this current age is that the power of God is always before God’s people and available to them in new and amazing forms and ways,

bringing with it healing and hope, wholeness and peace.

The challenge for us as a fellowship faith, as the Church of Jesus Christ, is to be constantly open to the ever new word of God, in our individual lives and in our lives together, and to be constantly discerning ways to make the basic tenants of the Christian faith meaningful and appropriate in the present, in this time, in this place, in this situation. We must always remember with clarity our past here and the greater past of the Church universal for it is the foundation upon which we stand. It is even appropriate to grieve the loss of those things of past that have been dear to us. AND, we must never allow ourselves to become too nostalgic, too desiring of the past, if for no other reason than the fact that it is over and gone.

I'm sure that I have quoted before the powerful hymn that was written well over one hundred years ago, "Once to Every Man and Nation", which proclaims in its second verse, "New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth." Even though even words like "uncouth" are no longer used much, the original poem by James Lowell as it was written in 1845 proclaimed that the passage of time makes the good of the past awkward in the present and that each new age requires new understandings of God's word and new ministries based on those new understandings. (The poem, by the way, was written by Lowell in part as a protest of America's warlike aggression against Mexico at that time.)

In this day, in this age, we must realize that we can never return to Lowell's so called simpler time of the past with its kerosene lamps and horses and buggies. We can't even return to a time when there were no computers or cell phones or ipods, when there was no talk of global warming or face book or terrorist cells, because even that time is past. Instead we must work to make the word of God viable in this age where all these things do exist and we must seek out and open ourselves to the power of God as it is made known to us here and now. And if there is one thing that even the most ancient of scriptures makes clear to us, it is that the power of God is indeed always present and is always offered to God's people of faith in new and amazing ways.

God will indeed give us new strength in this age so that we might mount up on wings as of eagles, just as God gave new strength to the people of Israel in the troubled times of the Babylonian conquest - over 2,500 years ago. God will show us new teachings filled with authority just as God showed the people of Capernaum new teachings through Christ the Son - some 2000 years ago. The power of God is present here and now, to heal and to make whole just as it has always been. Let us then open ourselves to the power God. Let us make ourselves

channels of that power by discerning the will of God and offering the good news of Christ to everyone with grace and love.

Amen