

DECEMBER 4, 2011: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 II Peter 3:8-14 Mark 1:1-8

Though we're separated by thousands of years, the sacred authors and I share a common problem. How do we begin our writings? I often spend more time developing my opening paragraph than I do on the rest of the commentary. Those first lines not only set the theme for the article, they must also motivate the reader to continue reading.

Two of today's three readings provide us with their authors' opening lines. Lots of thought went into them.

The disciples of Deutero-Isaiah who ordered the prophet's Isaiah 40-55 oracles were extremely careful to begin their collection by summarizing the message their martyred mentor had so courageously delivered. Though the prophet constantly spoke about his people's liberation from exile, his promise of freedom was intimately tied to a new image of Yahweh. It was one thing to say God will bring the captive Jews back to the Promised Land; it was something else to paint a picture of the God who was about to accomplish this feat.

Accustomed to other prophets and religious leaders labeling their exile a just punishment from the hands of a vengeful God, the beaten-down Jews were amazed at Deutero-Isaiah's first words. He insists they tear up that old picture of Yahweh. "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated. Indeed, she has received from the hand of Yahweh double for all her sins." Yahweh will lead them out of exile "... like a shepherd (feeding) his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care."

Liberation from Babylon will not only force Israelites to reflect more deeply on their ancestors' Exodus from Egypt, it will also make them reflect on those loving characteristics of Yahweh which they might never before have noticed. Different actions of God always expose different dimensions of God.

Mark operates from the same premise. He even integrates part of Deutero-Isaiah's initial oracle into his introduction. His very first line tells us the new direction God is charting for God's people: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Christ the Son of God." Though people expected God to send a Messiah (a Christ), no one expected this Christ to be God. Mark begins by reminding us that those who accept Jesus saving them must also accept the new image of God which Jesus conveys.

This seems to be why Mark starts his gospel on a note of anticipation. As in the well-known song from West Side Story, something big is going to happen. It's just around the corner! "One mightier than I is coming after me," the Baptizer promises. "I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The evangelist is convinced that only those who anticipate God working in their lives in new ways will recognize and accept the new ways when they arrive. Christians are constantly expected to anticipate the new.

It's here that today's II Peter pericope comes into play. That for which we're waiting doesn't always happen as fast as we anticipate it to happen. Writing almost a hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, our unknown author is not only trying to keep alive the hope that Jesus' Parousia will eventually arrive, he's also trying to tell his community what they're to do during this time of anticipation. They're to conduct themselves in "holiness and devotion," to be "found without spot or blemish. . . ."

Because we're God's followers, our sacred authors expect us to zero in on what God wants us to do day by day, all the while looking beyond this day to that new world God is helping us create by our everyday actions.

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DECEMBER 11, 2011: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11 I Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8,19-28

Presuming Jesus is God, it's difficult for us to conceive of him having models for his earthly ministry. Yet in chapter 4 of his gospel, Luke doesn't hesitate to have Jesus make the first part of today's Third-Isaiah reading an outline of what he plans to accomplish during his ministry.

Reflecting on his call, the prophet confidently proclaims, "The spirit of Yahweh God is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from Yahweh and a day of vindication by our God."

The historical Jesus obviously sees his own ministry as overlapping Third-Isaiah's ministry. Like this late sixth century prophet, the carpenter from Capernaum is convinced Yahweh has also sent him to liberate the oppressed. Through his ministry the beaten-down of this world will finally be lifted up, and because of the reference to "a year of favor from Yahweh," they'll be given the opportunity to start their lives all over again. According to Jewish law, every 50th year was earmarked a jubilee year: a year when all debts were canceled, all property returned to its original owners - sort of like F. D. R.'s Depression-era promise of a "New Deal." Everyone from this moment will begin with a clean slate.

But there's a price to pay for this new beginning. Third-Isaiah expects those recently-freed from exile to leave the relative security which 50 years of living in that rather plush foreign environment has provided. They're to return to a Jerusalem in ruins, committed to rebuilding it and its temple.

In a parallel way, the gospel Jesus expects his liberated followers to commit themselves to spending their lives imitating his dying and rising.

In today's I Corinthians passage, Paul tries to concretize that imitation. "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." But there's also an obligation to constantly be open to God's will in their lives. "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil."

The warning about despising prophetic utterances is especially important. Biblical people normally surfaced God's will in their lives by surfacing the prophets in their communities. Through these inspired men and women God showed how the liberation of the down-trodden was to take place.

This early Christian insistence on the importance of prophecy also seems to play a role in the evangelist's insistence that it was a prophet - John the Baptizer - who first points out the significance of Jesus.

Like all true prophets, the Baptizer continually turns the spotlight away from himself. John the gospel writer perfectly sums up the Baptizer's prophetic ministry: "He was not the light, but came to testify to the light."

Experts on John's gospel frequently point to one of the evangelist's main themes: though Jesus is the Word and Son of God among us, most people never discover his presence. That's why the Baptizer is quoted as saying. ". . . There is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."

Perhaps the most liberating message the prophets in our midst proclaim revolves around surfacing the "unrecognized" around us. Just as people once failed to recognize God in an itinerant preacher from Galilee, so today many fail to recognize the risen Jesus in the world's outcasts. Prophets continually point out that presence. Recognizing and listening to our prophets is the first step in achieving God's liberating plan.

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