

Waiting for Redemption”
by the Rev. Ann Dieterle
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Isaiah 35:1-10

Because I’ve lived on the East Coast all of my life, and in the southeast for most of it, I don’t think that I ever grasped the full weight of Isaiah’s vision of “waters breaking forth in the wilderness” or “streams in the desert” as a metaphor for redemption. That is, until I lived in the Arizona desert for three months, in a landscape where sources of water are truly rare. Everything is a shade of brown there. Even things that are green are a brownish-green. That is until you come upon a stream, or a place where there is water underground, and all of a sudden there you are, surrounded by lush, vibrant green plants and tall, glorious trees. I was able to experience the life-giving power of water in a new way while I was in the desert. It was then that I understood the poetry of Isaiah’s image of redemption.

But Isaiah writes this beautiful poetry to a people who are in exile. They are trapped in Babylon, a pagan kingdom, separated from their homeland and their temple. Into this reality, the prophet brings his vision of redemption, of hope for a reality that is still unfulfilled. Redemption may seem possible, but is not evident, and all the Israelites can do is wait and trust and hope.

The Israelites fear that God has deserted them, but Isaiah says- Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you.

Since Scripture is the living word of God, then we expect to find ourselves in this story, both in exile AND in this vision of redemption. But what is the exile in which we find ourselves? When God comes to save us, what will he save us from?

There are many times when I feel as if I’m in exile- cut off from the life that God wants me to live.

I’ve managed to avoid the stores since Thanksgiving- but yesterday I just couldn’t put it off any longer. As I surveyed the mob scene and tried to maneuver my cart through the aisles at Target, I could feel my anxiety rise, and an image came to my mind- or more accurately- a phrase from Matthew’s gospel: “when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹

I wonder if Jesus wouldn’t say something very similar about the national and international spending spree and shopping frenzy that has taken over his birthday. It seems to me that we are in exile in a consumer driven culture, and we need redeeming from the gluttony that feeds this reality. If we believe what advertisers tell us, then life is about what we can grab and hold on to. One commercial tells me that the more money I

¹ Matt. 9:36

save, the more Christmas I can give- as if redemption can be gift-wrapped and placed under a tree.

I doubt that any of us consciously live by this motto, but subconsciously, I find myself taken in and deceived. How many of you are worried that what you can purchase this year will not be enough?

In our quest to have enough- we wind up over-stuffed with things that do not satisfy, and so we are always wanting for more.

In stark contrast to the hurried frenzy and gluttony of the modern “Christmas” season is the message of Advent, the message of James. Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. James reminds us that life is not about what you can grab, life is largely about waiting, and being. This is not the same as doing nothing.

It means that we should enjoy the present moment rather than constantly worrying about what we have to do next.

It means that we should revel in silence, rather than constantly filling the space with background noise.

It means that we should take time for the things that are most important to us and most important to God.

If you start each day with just 5 to 10 minutes of prayer- and in that time- pray for the things you are going to do that day and the people you are going to see and interact with- I’ll bet that in a matter of weeks, you will feel the pace of life calm down, and your priorities shift.

I think most of us probably need redeeming from the gluttony of daily life. But some of us find ourselves in an emotional and spiritual exile in which we feel trapped. It doesn’t matter what caused us to be there- whether it is an exile of our own making or something far beyond our control- like sickness or grief- it is a lonely and desolate place.

You already know what James tells us this morning- that redemption often involves patience, suffering, and tears. We don’t want to hear that. We would all prefer something that happens quicker and that is a lot less painful.

But remember that redemption is a gift given to us by Jesus Christ. The only path to redemption is the Holy Way through which Jesus leads us. And although that path may be narrow and difficult- if we travel it we will know the reality of Isaiah’s message: That the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Healing is offered to us, and it’s not just the end of pain- it is radical transformation. Like waters breaking forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert, redemption is new life. In the life of the redeemed, sorrow and sighing have fled, and there is everlasting joy.

We are in exile and there are many things from which we need saving. And so we wait for the birth of the child King, our Savior.

Be strong, do not fear! Your God is coming to save you.