

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-11

^{40:1} Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Commentary

As mentioned last week, even though Isaiah is presented in one book, scholars have identified two or three writers who lived at different times and who addressed different historical experiences. Today's passage begins in "Second Isaiah," and the listeners of this book were middle and upper-class members of Judahite society--royalty, military leaders and craftsmen. They had been stripped of their power and removed from their land by the Babylonian conquerors in 597-587 BC. After years in exile, living among people who worshipped other gods, they had been influenced by pagan religious practices and had doubts about the extent of God's power and their status as God's people. Second Isaiah answered their doubts: God still had compassion for them. God was guiding history and soon would demonstrate divine power and grace by leading them on a journey even more glorious and promising than their ancestor's exodus from Egypt--the journey home.

Reflection

The return from exile was seen as evidence that God was at work in history. What events in our time demonstrate God's activity and power?

2 Peter 3:8-15a

^{3:8} But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. ¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him.

Commentary

The writer of Second Peter claimed to be "Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Christ." Scholarly consensus holds that he was a close associate of Peter's in Rome who wrote after Peter's death. Ancient texts were frequently written to honor the memory of the person named as the author. The practice also lent greater credibility to the work. Today in our lection, he explains the delay of the end of times in two ways. First, God's time is different than ours. What seems to us to be a holdup is not so for God. Second, the deferral of God's judgment is a sign of divine patience and kindness, not weakness. The delay allows us time to repent and make reconciliation, but time is limited. Finally, the author asks, what sort of person ought you be while you wait for Christ's return and God's judgment? (The writer believed this would occur during the lifetime of his audience of second-generation Christians.) His answer: You are to live a holy and godly life. You are to be "found by him at peace, without spot or blemish," when God's judgment finally comes.

Reflection

What meaning does a final judgment hold for you? Are you at peace with facing the end?

Mark 1:1-8

^{1:1} The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Commentary

Mark immediately ties his good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God to the Hebrew Scriptures and the prophecies of salvation from Malachi (3:1) and Isaiah (40:3). By linking his good news with the Old Testament, Mark underscores his claim: Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is the promised one who fulfills the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. Through Jesus, God has come to bring salvation to the people. Then Mark plunges into the story of John the Baptist, which reminded Mark's listeners of the next part of the story. This story reminds us to prepare the way always for Christ's coming in our midst. Preparing the way involves acts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and walking the way of Christ in our daily lives.

Reflection

Preparing involves personal action. How will you practice repentance and seek reconciliation during this Advent season?

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

^{85:1} LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² **You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin. Selah**

⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹ **Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.**

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹ **Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.**

¹² The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ **Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.