

Learning to Trust

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning comes from what is known as 2nd Isaiah which has as its theme a type of new exodus—an exodus from the Babylonian exile and a return to the land of their ancestors, promised to them through the Abrahamic covenant. This section is also known as the “Book of Comfort” for the message of hope it gives; the assurance that their God is still powerful; that they are still claimed under that covenant. These people are still living in exile, but the prophet is bringing them a word from God containing promise and hope for their future. This passage employs twelve imperatives; imperatives which are used to prompt, to call and to urge the faithful recognition of the presence of God with them and the fullness of God’s activity on their behalf. In many ways this section of Isaiah resembles what action a new king of that time would take when assuming the throne—in the ancient world the new king would issue a *misarum* edict which would declare a release from all previous debts held which would then be followed by a great banquet to be enjoyed by all the people. This edict was issued to signal a new day for the people. Isaiah is telling his people that their God is doing this same thing. The first verse of this chapter calls the people living in exile to “come to the waters.” This probably refers to the waters of Jerusalem, and the offer is not only of water for their thirst, but an invitation to come to a feast the Lord will provide. The message is not so much about the banquet menus of wine, milk, bread and rich food as it is about the message God is still and will continue to provide for them. These verses refer not only to material provision but also to spiritual care as it reminds them of the joy to be found in the presence of God. The call is for them to “listen” to God, to listen carefully so that they can be nourished: listen so that you may live. This passage institutes another covenant; this time not with an individual like Abraham or David, but with the people—again an everlasting covenant initiated by God for their benefit. The announcement of this covenant is followed by the call to “seek the Lord”, to “call upon him while he is near”. The call is for the wicked to forsake their way; the unrighteous their thoughts and return to the ways of the covenant which God has already revealed to them through Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah of Jerusalem and so many other prophets called by God to guide them. This call is for a repentance which will change their lives, which will gain them access to God’s forgiveness and mercy as God will pardon those who turn and repent. From this will come the new day. The themes in this passage from Isaiah reflect the overall thrust of Lent. In some sense Lent is an invitation to us to “thirst” and to “hunger” for God’s presence; for the ways of God. The invitation is to do more than simply drink from the waters God provides, but it is to join and participate in the work of God. That work is directed at more than simply ones interior life but to instead move from a work that begins in the interior to work that has implications for all of God’s world in verse 5 with the call to witness to nations that you do not know and that do not know God. Lent calls us to “seek the Lord” and to “call upon him” in verse 6. Lent is an open invitation and a reminder for us that this surprising work of God is open to us all—wicked and unrighteous alike—if we will return to our God who abundantly pardons. Our task is to respond to the invitation and seek this God whose thoughts are not like our thoughts and whose ways are certainly not like our ways. As verse 9 clearly states: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways high than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Again and

again, God issues this invitation to come...to seek those ways which are so radically different from the ones which humanity usually chooses. The passages in Isaiah emphasize the choices a person faces in the course of life. God is portrayed here and throughout scripture as giving a divine summons working through appeal and persuasion rather than command; yet still the message is that God's ways are so different that they can only be found by seeking the one who issues the invitation and going on this Godward journey. While the passage from Isaiah lives up to its position in the "Book of Comfort" offering both assurance and invitation to those who tune their thoughts and ways to those of God, the passage we have before us from Luke does not seem to offer much in the way of comfort. Luke is describing an interaction between Jesus and some folks who have brought to him what seems to have been a current events story of violence and disaster. This narration by Luke is the only mention of it and there is no historical account which specifically seems to match the event. The event involved the death of some Galileans by Pilate which seems to have taken place near the Temple as their blood mingled with sacrifices they had made. Jesus responds to their story by relating another tragic event—the death of 18 folks when the tower of Siloam fell upon them. This is another example for which there is no corresponding information. However, Pilate was known for his cruelty, especially in response to activity which could be seen as opposition to Roman rule, and the other is also a possibility as Siloam is a name associated with an area in Jerusalem. So the question it seems they had asked Jesus was similar to ones we often ask—Why? Jesus' response seems to indicate they were seeking to place the blame for their deaths on those who died. Jesus asks his questioners if they thought those who died, in either case, were worse sinners than others. We don't get their answer, but we do get Jesus affirming that their deaths were not the direct result of any sin they had done---yet he does not leave it at that. Instead his words become rather disquieting for us as he offers a warning for all that sounds ominous. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish, just as they did." Jesus takes the opportunity to place these calamities in a different light—beyond just why bad things happen to people. He affirms these events were not divine punishment; tragedy should not be equated with God's will. Sin does not make all atrocities, some just come. Life's fragility gives it urgency; a need to be in tune with God's ways. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and the "why" question because he wants to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal human condition, shared by random victims and those finger-pointing survivors. When Jesus says, twice, "unless you repent you will all perish" like the others did, he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid, or the faithful will not. He emphasizes the suddenness with which this death comes. Both Pilate's and the tower's victims did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise or have time to prepare for it. Jesus is pointing out that all who are unrepentant will suddenly find they have delayed too long and have lost themselves. Jesus does not promise freedom from calamity. Instead he urges his hearers against false self-assurances. The fragility of life demands an urgency that is shown by taking the opportunity to seize God's graciousness. The repentance that Jesus is speaking of is not that of saying I'm sorry...Here and in many other places in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective on everything. To think that human suffering is due to divine punishment for sin, an unknown flaw or secret misdeed persist into present day discussions of disasters; that it is an example of

God's justice persists into our time. It is often seen as the quick and easy remedy to explain illness and death. Of course we know there are cases where cause and effect can be established between risky behaviors and their consequences. But that is not the issue in all cases so we seek to find one that relieves us of our guilt or responsibility. We do not like God's ways which focus on community welfare which is achieved by placing others ahead of selfish wants and desires; we are often fearful of others without knowing them; we do not like to not be in control. Each of these behaviors are ones which call for us to repent and change. They are rooted in the many ways we are like those who fled Egypt under Moses, who continued to pursue their ways instead of God's which led them into exile; those who could not trust in the promise that God did make—not that nothing bad would ever happen, but that when it did they would not face it alone. God has been reaching out, making covenant with us from the beginning—desiring to be in that relationship where we lived our lives confidently trusting in God's provision for our welfare as God's people. The message of Lent is to seek a deeper relationship which comes through knowledge of self and God; to learn to hunger and thirst for that relationship which will satisfy as nothing else can.

The message of Easter is that we can trust the Good News which Jesus proclaimed: Repent. The Kin_dom of God is at hand. The tyrants of this world keep trying to kill the hope that another way is possible. I wonder how our communities will respond to the Good News that the hope revealed in Jesus' can be trusted. Can be trusted enough that we can already start living now for the new way of "heaven on earth." May it be so. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.