

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)
Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10 Psalm 146 James 5: 7-10 Matthew 11: 2-11
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Present and Future. When the present is painful and survival is the issue, a person or people need help to go on. Frequently they look to the future just to get through each day. Without hope our spirits can wither and we might throw up our hands in surrender or just want to lie down and die.

We can hear those dire straits behind the Isaiah reading. The first part looks to the future, hoping against hope. The future tense permeates this part of the lesson: “the desert and the parched land WILL exult...” Even nature will join in the exultation, the desert and steppe “will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.” Sounds like good news for some future time---which means it is not happening now! The current condition of the people Isaiah is addressing is suggested in the next section. The people have feeble hands that need strengthening; weak knees that need firming-up; hearts that are frightened. Of course they do! They are exiles in Babylon, slaves with no visible means of getting out to return to their homes.

But Isaiah is promised the seeming-impossible--- the hope of return. There will be another exodus and once again a desert journey will be required. But the people are in no shape to survive a desert ordeal and so God “will” make the desert bloom for them. The prophet encourages the dispirited exiles to have hope in God, indeed, even now he invites them to look for God’s coming, “Here is your God, who comes with vindication...to save you.”

We notice that when the people’s salvation comes, the created world itself will be transformed. All creation is God’s handiwork and the natural world will share the joy of God’s liberating acts for the people. Nature groans under the heavy hand of human greed and carelessness. We see the exodus imagery as a reminder that God wants to deliver us from the sin that oppresses us still. If nature’s corruption and exploitation are a result of human sin and brokenness, then the promised deliverance must affect our environment as well. The prophet shows that humans and nature both benefit from God’s coming. Advent could be a time when we prepare for the

coming of Christ by a more sober use of our resources, thus helping natural restoration and preservation. With our environment being more and more spent and wasted, how will it be able to contribute to our spirit of exultation at the messiah's coming? "The desert and the parched land will exult, the steppe will rejoice and bloom." Will they?

The first reading directs our eyes to the future coming of our God who will free us from any bonds of sin. Isaiah encourages us to look for those signs. Jesus draws on Isaiah to affirm that our hope had been fulfilled in him. Jesus tells John's disciples to take back to him what "you hear and see,"—the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise—"the lame walk, the blind regain their sight, ...etc." The signs are not only physical cures, but those who are also oppressed politically and economically, "...have the good news proclaimed to them." In Jesus, the hoped-for future had become a reality.

But, as we look to the future fulfillment of God's plan, let's not leave what Isaiah says about the present too quickly. The present is still a mess! Jesus may point out to John's disciples that a time of fulfillment has arrived, but is far from a "done thing." God has some work to do to bring things to fulfillment, and that involve us.

Jesus tells John's disciples to "tell John what you hear and see." Remember that John is in prison and can't personally witness Jesus' mighty words and deeds. So, word will have to be sent to his prison cell. Now we know he never got out of prison alive, so this prisoner wasn't literally set free, as the exiles in Babylon were when God acted on their behalf. But news of what Jesus was revealing was brought to John by trustworthy messengers. Which is what we are called to be for people who are "locked up" and unable to free themselves, or are too preoccupied to consider making the trip to see who Jesus is for themselves. Our words and deeds, or maybe just our presence, may be the only contact others have with Jesus from whatever cells keep them locked up. If freedom from fear, poverty, loneliness, ignorance and sin are to come to them, we must be the bearers of that good news by our words and loving acts on their behalf. "Go and tell [them] what you see and hear." Like John's disciple, we have seen and heard the Lord in our own lives and must make the trip back to others who haven't, or whose lives are so desperate, that on their own then cannot see any deeds or hear any words that offer them hope.

What brings Christ's living presence to us today? Well, his word has been passed on to us by our ancestors, who like John's disciples, were reliable and trusted messengers of faith. Witnesses to Christ's presence also comes to us in those around us who minister to the needs of people confined and cut off from us by sickness, poverty, alienation, indifference, materialism or the distractions of the current buying frenzy. What we hear and see here in each other, the living and healing presence of Christ, we need to take back to others not sharing our vision of hope today.

Some reflective questions at this point. No barrier should separate others from the good news Jesus has for them; which calls us to examine the quality of our witness. By our words and actions, do people experience the One who gives sight, hearing, strength and life? Do the poor have the good news proclaimed to them through us?

John the Baptist has a word or two for us today. We certainly could use a little good news to sustain us! First of all, John is nothing if he isn't persistent. He must have been confused. Last week we found him at the Jordan, today we hear his questions from prison. Jesus is not what John anticipated, but John doesn't give up on God's good intentions for us. John keeps up the questions, which implies he is a man of hope. When at first life doesn't go as planned and our hopes are disappointed, maybe we shouldn't give up on God too easily either. God has more to say and, like John, even in disappointment, we need to keep trusting and asking and waiting for a response. John may have had disappointed expectations, but the final word is---- God does not disappoint.

John was in prison because he didn't give up proclaiming the truth he heard for God. No forces, no threats, could stop him from witnessing to God's will, which we hear clearly expressed in Isaiah today. God wants things to be put right in the world and we must play some part in righting them.

John learned a lesson from the news his disciples brought back to him. He wanted a God of fire and brimstone and what he got was Jesus, who preached full and endless forgiveness offered to the very "chaff" John expected to see burned. Maybe what we learn today is to be less judgmental and more forgiving—which might go a long way to enable "the blind to regain their sight, the lame walk,

lepers cleansed, the deaf hear and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.

John the Baptist's example feeds our hope. We may be hoping for something we think is a good thing from God, but God can exceed our plans and expectations. Advent is a good time to put aside the confines we place on God, and let God be God and surprise us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Andrew-Carl Wisdom, O.P. PREACHING TO A MULTI-GENERATIONAL ASSEMBLY. Liturgical Press, April 2004.

With the acceleration of technological change, new and distinct generations are created faster than before. Generational boundaries become more fluid. Multiple age groups have different generational mindsets, distinct worldviews, and varied spiritual needs. How, then, do preachers speak to congregations that comprise four to five separate generations? PREACHING TO A MULTI-GENERATIONAL ASSEMBLY addresses how to effectively and credibly preach to all generations at the same time.

In Preaching to a Multi-generational Assembly Andrew-Carl Wisdom offers a credible, new homiletic model to make Catholic preaching more exciting, accessible, and effective for both the assembly and preacher by making it more generationally relevant. He reflects upon the current state of preaching through Catholic and Protestant voices. He argues from communication theory that generation is a subculture like ethnicity and race and should be seriously considered in homiletic preparation. He applies contemporary marketing segmentation theory to preaching in proposing a qualified "generational segmentation" of the Sunday assembly. Finally, he combines both theories to demonstrate both the opportunity and viability of intergenerational preaching in a Catholic context.

----(From the "USA Dominican Life" webpage (<http://www.domlife.org/>)

QUOTABLE

(A quote from Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" reflects the feelings of today's first reading)

And then all that has divided us will merge
And then compassion will be wedded to power

And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
 And then both men and women will be gentle
 And then no person will be subject to another's will
 And then all will be rich and free and varied
 And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
 And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance
 And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
 And then all will nourish the young
 And then all will cherish life's creatures
 And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth
 And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I'll see you next week,’ when you never know if they're going to call and say, ‘He's up next—it's time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Christopher Roseboro #0352024 (On death row since 8/29/97)

Roger Blakeney #0033802 (9/10/97)

Marcos Mitchell #0488288 (11/4/97)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and

major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh.

Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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