

PAYBACK

3 Advent, Year A, December 16, 2007

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church Haddonfield

You'll notice that I have a camera today. Most of you know that I like to take pictures. I've been snapping photos today to send to one of our parishioners who is at Parris Island going through basic training right now. One of the great things about cameras is that it freezes a moment for us. We can take a picture right here and now and enjoy it for years to come. I have loads of albums and pictures. The staff cringes when I have the camera out. They know I'll want the photos to appear on a bulletin board or in the newsletter. The only thing a camera can't do is give us a glimpse of the future.

But someone does give us a vision of the future this morning. His name is Isaiah. Isaiah is probably one of the most familiar Old Testament prophets to Christians. We hear from him during Advent. One of the reasons we find him so familiar is that from an early time, we found fulfillment in Isaiah's words in the person of Jesus Christ. He lived hundreds of years before Jesus was even born, but the one he spoke about we find embodied in Jesus.

Isaiah faced a difficult time. The Hebrews in the north of Israel lived under a threat from the north, the Assyrians. This race of warriors would sweep south, conquer them and carry the Israelites off into captivity. Much later, the southern part of the kingdom would fall to the Babylonians ... and the remaining Israelites would suffer the same fate. Can you imagine what that might be like? The people would lose everything. They would lose their homes, their places of worship, their families and friends. They would be carried off to a strange and hostile place that seemed devoid of hope.

Into the darkness of their lives Isaiah speaks this morning. He holds out a vision that promises the people that God has not abandoned them. Isaiah tells the people that there is reason to hope, that God will act in their lives and they will be given a new life! In particular, Isaiah will mention four signs that point to this new reality. He mentions the wilderness, the sick, drought and a highway.

The wilderness is a familiar theme in the Old Testament. It's a bleak and dangerous place where death lingers. It's a place of testing. Isaiah knew the people felt like they were thrust back into the wilderness. What does it feel like to be in a wilderness experience? Too many people know. Ask the person who just lost a loved one. Ask the person who just lost their job. Ask the person who has suffered a personal set back. The wilderness is a desert in life that feels void of everything, even God.

But Isaiah has a different vision of the wilderness. He speaks of it coming alive by the grace of God. The desert blooms into an oasis in this vision. Have you ever been in a desert? On a trip to Phoenix one time, a friend told me we had to go out into the desert. My first visit to that city was unnerving ... everything was brown! I'm an Easterner. I like green! As we came over this ridge, the desert spread out in front of me ... full of color! It had recently rained and a wonderful carpet of yellow, red and orange span as far as I could see! This is what Isaiah is talking about. Into the wilderness of our life, God will bring life where we imagine none could exist!

The next thing Isaiah speaks about is people who are sick. Times of illness are difficult. How many of us had trouble getting up this morning due to the rain and cold? How many knees ached so badly we could hardly get up? Want to know what sickness is like? Talk to a person in the

PAYBACK

3 Advent, Year A, December 16, 2007

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church Haddonfield

hospital, or another caring for a sick relative. But Isaiah could have been speaking about something more with the Israelites. They just had lost everything; there was probably more than enough despair and depression running rampant around. What to know how bad illness can be, then you meet my friend who called this weekend. She suffers terribly, and has for years. Now she's been diagnosed with a multiple personality disorder. How hopeless does illness make us feel?

And yet, into the illness, into the despair of the Israelites, Isaiah offers a vision of wholeness! In God's kingdom, there will be healing that changes people's lives! We get another glimpse of this in Matthew's Gospel today. When John the Baptist was in prison, he worried whether he would see the savior of Israel. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one?" He wanted to know if Jesus was the one who would usher in this new age, this time when the vision of God's kingdom would fill the earth with hope, peace and joy.

What's Jesus' reply? You know, Jesus doesn't give a straight answer. He tells people to tell John what they hear and see ... and what's that? The sick are healed, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dead are raised! No wonder we like Isaiah so much! In Jesus, we finally see the vision-taking root! In him, the Kingdom comes closer to us as a reality.

Isaiah speaks about a drought. Remember that this part of the world desperately relies on water. It's a matter of life and death. Isaiah speaks about the drought being broken, of water flowing in the desert! Have you ever been really thirsty? Want to know what that is like? Ask our friends in Atlanta. They are close to running out of water! The future wars in this world will be fought over water, not oil! I heard this weekend about places that are trying to get drinking water from saltwater and wastewater ... think about that with your next cup of coffee or tea this morning! Isaiah, however, talks about an abundance of water, life-giving water that will quench the people's thirst!

Finally, Isaiah talks about a highway. This will be the highway that leads the people back to their home. But Isaiah is also talking about a highway that leads the people back to God. Think about our highways. We have built these wonderful marvels of roads throughout our country, we have used our technology to help us move everywhere, but at what cost? For all our human efforts, we now spend long times in traffic jams. We experience something called road rage and there is a troubling phenomenon called hit and run accidents. Our efforts pale miserably. But the vision of a highway that Isaiah holds out is the one that takes us directly back to God ... and for us as Christians, Jesus is "the way", the highway that takes us home!

Isaiah is speaking about miracles, but are there miracles in our day? Jesus tells John's disciples to go back with the knowledge of the miracles that point to the sign of God's in-breaking kingdom! Are there miracles today? I think I may have come across one! This past week, there was a miracle at a Starbucks in Portland. Maybe some of you hear about it. Do we have any Starbucks patrons here? Ah yes!

Apparently, a man was in the drive through line ordering his coffee. Right away, for me, that's not a good thing. The drive thru was supposed to speed us through our visit. I rarely find that

PAYBACK

3 Advent, Year A, December 16, 2007

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church Haddonfield

my experience! As this man sat in line, the driver behind him laid on the horn. There were curses coming from the car! This guy must have been in a very big hurry! Now, my first inclination would be to get out of the car and confront the driver and ask him what the hell is his problem! This driver acted differently. When the clerk handed him his coffee, he gave the clerk money as said, "I'd like to pay for the guy in back of me." WOW! Think about that! As a Christian, I see God's spirit at work! Instead of anger and retaliation, there was an act of compassion! The driver paid and drove on.

Can you imagine the guy would pull up next? He was anger. He was in a hurry. I feel sorry for the poor clerk who had to suffer his abuse! He ordered his grandee, double latte mocha and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. The clerk handed him his coffee and he raged about the cost of the coffee when he barked, "How much?" Can you imagine his surprise when he clerk said, "The guy in front of you paid for you." I would have loved to have been in the car with him at that moment! Can you imagine the shock? Did he feel shame or remorse? What happened? He could have just driven on, but there was a transformation that took place. He paid for the person behind him! And on and on it went for much of the day! The person in front of the line paid back for the person behind them! Not that's a miracle to me!

What Isaiah is talking about to us today is a vision and a miracle to come. God is working something new in our lives. We can choose to be part of it or not. We will not be able to save the world, but we can payback a piece of it by the little things we do. I wonder how different our lives and the lives of others might be if we were to do this? Jesus is coming, that is what Advent is all about. There are going to be changes, there is a promise of hope, of life, of peace and of JOY! Well, after all, this is "joy" Sunday in Advent! May we be part of the joy! May we be part of the vision! May we see Isaiah's hope come true and we celebrate and payback in anticipation of the incarnation celebration!