

Experiencing Strife; Finding Peace
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Isaiah 40.3-5; 2 Peter 3.13-15; Mark 1.1-8
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My great-aunt Gladys had to have gall-bladder surgery and so she checked into St. Luke's Hospital. The clerk who was admitting her asked if she had insurance, and she said, "Only medicare." The clerk then asked if she could pay what Medicare didn't cover, and Aunt Gladys said, "I'm afraid not." The clerk then asked if she had any family who could help pay her expenses, and she said, "Well, I have a daughter but she is a poor, spinster nun." The clerk suddenly scolded my great aunt, saying, "Nuns are not spinsters; they are married to Jesus." Aunt Gladys said, "Fine – send the bill to my son-in-law."

The book of Isaiah actually has at least three contributors, and today's reading comes from the section of Isaiah that was written by the second contributor; scholars call this section "Second Isaiah." This section of the book of Isaiah was probably written about 2500 years ago. During that time, the Jewish people were in exile, having been conquered by the Babylonian Empire.

This second contributor to the book of Isaiah is speculating that the Babylonians may actually be defeated by the Persian Empire ; and it was well known that the Persians often allowed conquered people to return to their homelands.

Believing that Persia might defeat the Babylonians, 2nd Isaiah begins the 40th chapter by saying, "Give comfort to my people..." And by verse 3 he is saying, "Prepare the way..." By verse 5 he shares the vision of divine glory, when the people will be able to go home, and they will experience the joyful homecoming together.

Now the truth is, the Babylonian exile had lasted a long time, and some people were probably comfortable with it, at least used to it. Some had even managed to prosper. And while the rhetoric of returning home was popular, Isaiah now sees it as a very near possibility, and that means change, and for some, that means anxiety.

Not everyone would have readily embraced Isaiah's enthusiasm about going home. What if it wasn't as we remember? What about those who were born and raised in exile and for whom "home" seemed more legendary than real? What about the damage that had been done to the homeland; would it be possible to repair it? There were questions, concerns, fears...and so, even though Isaiah has good news, he knows that he must present it with a word of comfort.

Even positive change can be a little scary, and so Isaiah is casting the vision of possibility hoping to stir up more enthusiasm than despair. While he calls the people to bold action and courageous hope, he is also careful to highlight the possibilities, the opportunities, the good news so that they will have peace even in the midst of change and uncertainty.

We begin today looking at Isaiah, because Mark does.

Mark first says that he is presenting a gospel of Jesus the Anointed. In Mark's world, there is one person about whom Good News is declared: Caesar. In Mark's world, there is one person who holds the title of divine son, or son of a god: Caesar. In

Mark's world, there is one person who claims to be the bringer of peace: Caesar. There is one person is the king of all kings – imperator – emperor, one person who is the sovereign of peace, one person who is chosen by the gods to rule over the earth, and that person is not a Galilean peasant!

So it is radical, seditious, uncomfortably political when Mark's first words are to say he is writing a gospel about someone other than Caesar. His gospel, his good news is about Jesus whom he then gives a title: Christ, Messiah, the divinely anointed one. It is about the year 70, Rome has destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem and Mark responds with a performance piece that begins with the proclamation of good news about someone who is not only NOT the head of the Roman government but is someone the Roman government executed! And he calls him anointed on top of all that (Christ means anointed).

Mark is playing with fire! But part of Mark's good news is that even when the world is falling apart, we have the option of having hope and peace right in the middle of it all. No matter what is happening, we have the option of going to peace instead of to pieces.

After his jarring opening statement where he openly denies that Caesar is the only bearer of good news, Mark then quotes Isaiah: Isaiah, who also wrote in response to the politics of empire. Quoting Isaiah, Mark says, "Make ready the way of OUR God." Not Caesar...not "their" god which was the god of military power and conquest; make ready the way of OUR God...the god of the marginalized, the forgotten, the outcast. Our understanding of divinity is more inclusive, more just, more life-giving than imperial notions of divinity...that is at least Mark's argument.

Mark then launches right into the fiery preaching of John the Baptizer who is quoted in verse 8 as saying, "there is one coming who will immerse you in the holy Spirit, the power of God, the energy of life."

You see, Mark is saying that Jesus' ministry was a baptism of the spirit...it was an immersion in the very life of God, the power of goodness that must prevail even when situations and circumstances are unfair. There is an affirmation of our dignity that no injustice can take away. That's the heart of Jesus' ministry; that's the baptism of the spirit. That is our hope and it helps us find peace even when we have experienced strife.

Both Isaiah and Mark are doing exactly what the writer of 2 Peter suggests: While they are hoping and working and waiting for justice and renewal and healing, they are endeavoring to find peace. They aren't waiting until things get better, they are choosing peace right in the midst of the chaos, and that peace sustains them until things get better.

Our readings today remind us that when the economy betrays us, when our health seems to fail us, when our friends abandon us, when our families misunderstand us, when our government vilifies us, when churches demonize us, when it all seems to be going to hell in a hand-basket, there is still the option to go to peace instead of to pieces. None of that other stuff can rob us of our human dignity, our enormous potential, our sacred value. When we remember that, we find we are immersed in God's spirit, and peace is just one of the delicious fruits of that spirit. This is the good news. Amen.

**I believe in peace.
I embrace peace.
I experience peace.
I share peace.
God's peace is now mine.
Alleluia!
Amen.**

"Serenity is not freedom from the storm but peace amid the storm." Alcoholic Anonymous