

Ps 27; Is 9:1-4; 1 Cor 1:10-18; Mt 4:12-23

3rd Sunday in Epiphany – 01-22-17

Are the prophets still speaking the truth – to us – in our time? Let's look to the Prophet Isaiah – this is the Isaiah who served the kings of Judah at Jerusalem. This was during the 8th c BC. Our brief Scripture passage from Isaiah 9 is part of a larger passage in which the prophet speaks to Ahaz, king of Judah, about the complex political and military circumstances of the time. Isaiah speaks here of the current Assyrian occupation of “the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.” The area is also known as the Galilee. There were such political shenanigans going on – intrigue, betrayal, assassination. The people, including the king, were thrashing about looking for help. Some had given into the temptation to consult mediums and wizards (Is 8:19-20) about the future. And they began to form dangerous alliances with stronger nations seeking military protection and increased power in the region.

Isaiah pronounces doom upon any nation that abandons the one true God for the forces of darkness. The theme of light interrupting darkness is woven throughout this prophetic

passage. We, the church, are now celebrating the season after the Epiphany – the dawning of the Light of the World upon the Gentiles. So, Isaiah receives a kind of laser vision – super-coherent light – that cuts through the murky and complex events of Judah’s struggle with its neighbors and with the super-power, the Assyrian empire. Light that continues to shine.

You might wonder why Isaiah would go to the trouble of bestowing such insightful prophecy upon a loser like King Ahaz. One possibility is that Ahaz will soon see his northern neighbor, King Hoshea of Israel, defeated and the capital of the nation destroyed. God is going to spare Judah in coming years, and there is a door open for King Ahaz to repent of his idolatry and his foolish politics. This is the “one more chance” everybody hopes for – but Ahaz brushes it off – and shows such contempt for the very Word of God – lavished upon him by God’s man, the Prophet Isaiah – that the moment passes. The door closed, the train left the station, and Ahaz missed it. The opportunity offered by the Lord is arrogantly wasted.

And in the ensuing chapters of the Book of Isaiah, God sets out just how desperate and complete will be the humiliation and the ruin of Judah. As my mother often said, “Sin in haste, repent at leisure.” Judah will be brought to her knees, her head shaved, her fine clothes reduced to filthy rags, her young men and women tied up and carried off to Babylon before it is all said and done. If you are aghast at the wickedness and violence of Assyria – wait until you experience the armies of Babylon! The nation that will not repent of idol-worship and injustice done to the least among her people – the poor, the hungry, the naked – that nation will be brought low by the Almighty.

And the Lord said, let it all be done, and let the instrument of correction be prepared for a people who have turned their back on Me.

We move from the 8th c BC to the 1st c AD. The Apostle Matthew, who knew and loved the Lord Jesus, is sitting down to write about all that he remembers of the life and ministry of our Savior.

When the Lord Jesus was baptized – an event we celebrate in the church with the renewal of our own covenant with God – He was immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness. He fasted and prayed and Satan came and tempted Him. When He emerged from that testing, He began His public ministry – announced and affirmed by John Baptist, the last of the old-time prophets.

Once again, massive military and political power has moved into Zebulun and Naphtali – the region of the Galilee. This time, power emanates from Rome, not Ninevah, Assyria. This oppressor has seen no equal in all the history of the world. This is not the power of stone, nor of bronze. This is the power of iron.

Rome occupies the Holy Land and Caesar has his boot upon the neck of Israel/Palestine. But, the words of the Prophet Isaiah still ring true – perhaps more true than when the reign of King Hezekiah was foretold. Now, the reign of the King of kings and the Lord of lords is actually coming to pass. Jesus moves to Capernaum – where Simon bar Jonah has a home. These fishermen, Simon who became Peter, and

Andrew, also James and John, sons of Zebedee, hear the call that breaks the power of darkness. No oppressor, not Assyria, not Babylon, not Rome – can quench the light of God in Jesus Christ. The call of God in Christ dispels the most profound wickedness – it breaks the power of the most evil intentions.

The train is coming into the station once more. Jesus gives the call: “Come, follow me – and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” (v 19) And, these plain fishermen immediately leave their nets and follow Him. Ordinary guys – with no special training or talent in teaching or preaching – strike out to walk beside Jesus into the ministry of the Gospel. The light of Christ is shed all over the region of the Galilee – and eventually far, far beyond that place and time.

Paul offers his best thinking on this call that he too has heard. He warns the congregation at Corinth not to miss the train – the train to glory. He reminds the Corinthians – and us – he was not sent to speak clever words that distract from the power of the **cross of Christ**. We speak the truth – we tell the old, old story yet again. It seems like

foolishness to those who are hard-wired into the struggle for power and control. Ahaz was duped by the notion of his own sovereignty. The Corinthians have a delusion about the power of human will. Isaiah, Matthew and Paul celebrate the coming of the Light of the World – the only begotten Son of God.

The Good News – and the call to follow Jesus, the crucified One – this call is the power of God that saves believers – then and now. The Light of Christ is powerful. The Light of Christ breaks the chains of darkness, loss and despair. The door Isaiah showed to a lost ruler is still open today – you can get on board – Jesus said “Come follow Me!” Amen.