

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated; Indeed, she has received from the hand of the LORD double for all her sins. A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; The rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. A voice says, "Cry out!" I answer, "What shall I cry out?" "All flesh is grass, and all their glory like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower wilts, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it. So then, the people is the grass. Though the grass withers and the flower wilts, the word of our God stands forever." Go up onto a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; Cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm; Here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, Carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 96:1-2, 3 and 10ac, 11-12, 13

***The Lord our God comes with power.***

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all you lands. Sing to the LORD; bless his name; announce his salvation, day after day.

***The Lord our God comes with power.***

Tell his glory among the nations; among all peoples, his wondrous deeds. Say among the nations: The LORD is king; he governs the peoples with equity.

***The Lord our God comes with power.***

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let the sea and what fills it resound; let the plains be joyful and all that is in them! Then let all the trees of the forest rejoice.

***The Lord our God comes with power.***

They shall exult before the LORD, for he comes; for he comes to rule the earth. He shall rule the world with justice and the peoples with his constancy.

***The Lord our God comes with power.***

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:12-14

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did

not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of Advent**

Today’s readings are familiar ones. With familiarity can come feelings of comfort; even complacency. Isaiah had God speaking comfort to God’s people. We all like being comfortable. Is being comfortable what God has promised? Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Jerusalem had been destroyed by Babylonian troops. The populace was carried off as slaves to the conquerors and now live scattered throughout the known world and among pagans. There’s more going on in these words than comfort and tenderness.

The late statesman and scholar, Abba Eban said in his television documentary, “Heritage: Civilization and the Jews,” that the greatest threat to Judaism and the Jewish people is assimilation into a wider, non Jewish society. The notion of a “Holy Nation” and a “People Set Apart,” which was the call and blessing of God in the Covenant on Mount Sinai did not, at first, include a life scattered amid unbelieving people. Since the Diaspora, it does now. Isaiah’s prophesy intended to address the new reality of not having anchor points for the Covenant.

There is no national identity; the Promised Land is in ruins. Jerusalem, the temple and king are no more. How can people in mourning and longing continue? I have had the opportunity, in life, to have met Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Most had deep and profound faith in God, along with a number tattooed on the inside of their left forearm. A few became atheists who wanted to put Jewishness behind them and become like everyone else. Assimilation has not happened, as a rule. The covenant with Abraham, Moses and God’s people is still a powerful bond between God and God’s people. Isaiah’s prophesy has come to pass.

Comfort and tenderness could be found in Diaspora. God could be known where people now lived. I have always wondered why God would re-engineer the world. God, originally, saw it was good. This is a new way for God to enter the lives of God’s people apart from Israel and Judah. The key word is for. The paths are straight for God not to God. God wouldn’t necessarily rebuild the Promised Land, Jerusalem or the temple. He would build and restore God’s people. The Covenant and God’s Word are eternal. Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt several times in History, but the Faith of God’s people endures. God lives through, with and in them.

God did not gather the people in a specific place. God gathers with them where they are. Only God is holy. People become holy in God. Remembering God and discovering God to be near are the internal experience of holiness. The other is bringing God into a waiting world; giving witness to faith by what we do, choose and say. We do so not by any quality that we have but by God’s grace. Isaiah, in proclaiming God’s word has led to our faith in Jesus today. People believed them and died. We live today, in God’s grace. The gifts of life, love, faith and hope still reveal God’s Word and work.

One of the most astounding things of religion is how we religious people attempt to limit God. We are created, as human beings, in God’s own image and likeness yet we try to reshape God into ours. Sometimes we expect God to punish sinners as we forget our own sins. Think of how

casually we can say to another, "Go to hell!" Sometimes for some petty difference of opinion. Jesus asked his disciples for their opinion. Notice that they never gave it. That's because the scriptures are written for us who read them. He really asked us for ours.

None of us own sheep so none of us will be searching for a lost one. For whom or what would we search? Our kids, wallet or keys? Maybe. The point of his question was to reveal God's infinite, eternal and unconditional love. God seeks, saves and forgives each sinner. This includes you, me and our worst enemy! Who is God's beloved? Each human being is God's beloved child worth more to God than a lost wallet or key. Jesus wants us to know that. His words today are radical. We might put a sinner, i.e. one other than ourselves, in eternal torment; but would God? By faith we must believe that there's a hell. We also believe in God's limitless compassion and mercy for said sinner, of whom I am foremost. We do not have to believe that anyone is there.

God gives gifts in God's own time and manner. As Paul said everything is a gift and grace of God. We don't have to like them, though. The pandemic is part of this day and this day is God's gift to us. God also will give us what we need to live this day. Wear your mask in public and by all means get vaccinated. These are also part of this day and God's gift to us. God gives us the grace to be responsible to and for each other.

When I was a kid in grammar school I was taught by nuns. Since in those days they wore a Christian form of a burka, as their habit completely covered them, one could not readily know their age. My mother's god-mother became a nun and taught school, here at Divine Savior twice I believe. I had some insider information. Sometimes the young entrants or novices would be given a class of kids before they had a college degree. My great aunt went to college during summers. It took several years of summer school to get her BA and many more to get a couple MAs. Sometimes it wasn't clear when they said, "It's a mystery," if they were telling a cosmic truth or hiding the fact that they didn't yet know the real answer to a question.

One day, in religion class, we were learning who went to heaven and who did not. Even though this is completely in God's hands, we treated it as if it were in ours. Little did we know that in doing this, we took the place of God. In doing so, we committed the sin of idolatry as we judged others. The teacher stated that as the One True Church, only Catholics went to heaven. I had, and have, family who are not. I raised my hand and thereby had a name and person in mind that this gal said, in effect, was going to hell! I asked if this was true. Let me say that, "It's a mystery didn't cut it. This was my dad's first cousin who was Methodist and actively so. She didn't drink, dance or play cards. She was active in caring for the poor and sick. She was her church's book keeper as well as organist. If she were going to hell, I had no chance, as a kid to go to heaven.

All people regardless if God has yet to give them faith are God's beloved. Each human being is God's Little One. In God's unconditional love he will not lose a soul. To lose one is against God's will. As Jesus has taught us to pray, "Thy will be done; thy Kingdom come. He meant it. Do we? I suspect Jesus still awaits our answer.

Isaiah spoke of God who will take the shortest, straightest path into the hearts of all God's people. Each of us, by our humanity, is therefore God's beloved one. Many believed in the generations before us and many will come to believe when we, like the grass and flowers, die.

God's word and will are eternal; revealing God's infinite, eternal and unconditional mercy to save and forgive sinners, of who I am foremost.

May we know the blessing of the Lord in the land of the living.

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