

Sermons at St Paul's

The Second Sunday of Advent

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

If the First Sunday of Advent was all about staying awake and on topic while we prepare a place in our hearts to celebrate the Incarnation, the Second Sunday of Advent is certainly all about Prophets.

In our very scientific and technological age, we don't give much attention to prophets. In fact, we tend to be very wary of anyone called a prophet. We prefer the names "futurist" and "longcaster" because they are data-driven. In a world where we have the illusion that we can curate our lives as carefully and masterfully as we may curate our social media and newsfeeds, the very idea of someone claiming to have direct inspiration by God about the future is unsettling to say the least.

Yet that is exactly what the middle part of the Old Testament gives us. First comes The Law; then come The Prophets. These are the sacred Scriptures that Jesus read, studied and preached. The prophet Isaiah speaks to us through our first reading today about a world in which God's people, the Israelites, will be removed from the exile they have suffered under the Babylonians and returned to their former lands. Isaiah's vision of their return is one where the very land will be transformed as evidence that God loves and cares for God's people.

Our second reading, from the Second Letter of Peter, is another sort of prophecy, about "the end of times" when all we know will fall apart and be recast as "a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."

Even our gospel, the opening of the Gospel of Mark, talks about prophets: Isaiah and John the Baptizer – both of whom tell us to be ready for the coming of the Lord.

So what about these prophets? Just how important are they today in a world defined by Boolean algebra, gravitational waves in space/time and social media? When was the last time someone asked you: "Have you heard what our Prophet just said?"

What is a prophet, anyway? The classic definition is: a person who is directly inspired by God to speak the truth about coming events. In the past century, this definition was broadened to include anyone who "prophesied" or spoke what they believed to be God's truth about the current state of affairs in the world. That let a lot of "truthsayers" into the Prophet pool, and as is always the case, once there got to be a lot of people engaged in the business, every one's social standing went down. Journalists tried to take over the prophesying job, and now we can see and hear them on "60 Minutes." (Hmmm, wonder if that is why it is the longest running TV show on record? Maybe we really do want to know the truth!)

So if we have this hankering to know the truth, and we look for information about the coming of God and God's Incarnation, where shall we look? I checked on line, and could find no good modern reference for accurate information about the coming of Jesus. It is all old, or interpretation or speculation or denial. The most recent and substantive work was done at the

Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451 AD! I guess we are back to the gospels and the prophets!

Many years ago, shortly after I finished my Ph. D. work, I protested to our then Rector, Charles Carter, that the Bible was a very inexact and not very helpful series of writings to know about Jesus. He looked at me tolerantly, and said: "But Carroll, it is all that we have."

So there you have it. Those prophets are all that we have to tell us about what God plans for the future. Isaiah tells the captive Jews in Babylon what their return to the Holy Land will be like. Mark uses Isaiah and John the Baptizer to tell the story of the coming of the Messiah to God's people. The writer of the second letter of Peter (and it may have been the apostle himself) tells us of a vision of the Messiah's promised return, the Day of God, and our hopeless inability to predict when that will happen.

What shall we say then about Prophets in our own time? What evidence do we have for Jesus' return? We live in a universe that seems to be expanding exponentially, and the powerful new radio telescope in the high thin air of the Atacama Desert of Chile confirms how huge the universe is. The irony of all this good science is that it shows us older and older light from farther and farther away. The past is revealed as longer and more complex than we could have imagined. Our temptation is to take it as evidence of the future, because we are just learning it.

What evidence is there about the future? Precious little!

Our spiritual ancestors were not scientists in our modern sense, but they asked the same questions we do. They were not stupid, and they did think about things we are not much given to pondering. The Greek philosophers, the Persian Magi and the Jewish scholars thought long and hard about questions like: Why we are here? and Where are we going? The gift of the Jews was their focus on a single God, and their insistence that all speculation must begin and end with God. Their grounding documents were the Law and the Prophets.

Looking back at the prophecies of Ezra, Nehemiah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the Jewish scholars of Jesus' time decided that the best guide to their thinking about the eventual coming of the Messiah was to be found in prophecies. So it was natural for Mark to begin his gospel by citing both ancient Isaiah and the newest prophet, John the Baptizer. Together their prophecies laid the groundwork for the Messiah's arrival. Mark would reveal to his readers and listeners that Jesus the Anointed One is the Good News we have been waiting for; God's Son has been born on earth. For Mark and the other Gospel writers, Jesus' life and death and resurrection are evidence, once again, of God's enduring love for God's people.

So this is why we read and study the prophets on this Second Sunday of Advent. We will celebrate God's Incarnation two weeks from this Monday, as we hear the Good News of His birth. And indeed, we should listen carefully and watch closely, because he has said that one day up ahead he is coming again. Stay awake!

Amen.