

Advent 3 (2020)

Waiting at the checkout counter at the grocery store, I found my eyes being drawn to one of those ‘news’ tabloids. Here were the headlines: **Vaccine will not work. Virus to stay.**

Lower on the same cover another headline: **Portable morgues to be set up in cities.**

In a similar vein, a few days before Thanksgiving, a major television network prognosticated: **“Another 60,000 Americans could lose their lives over the next three weeks.”**

My goodness! The herald of falsehood and fear are sure out there in full force, and have been throughout much of 2020.

I suppose dishing out fear is one way of making money in today’s news market.

Where have the likes of Ralph McGill, Walter Cronkite, Edward R. Murrow gone?

For those too young to remember:

-- **McGill** was the fearless editor and later publisher of The Atlanta Constitution who spoke out for fairer treatment of Blacks at a time when segregation was the accepted norm in the South.

-- **Cronkite** was CBS’s anchor man who will be forever remembered for his closing words on his nightly broadcasts: “And that’s the way it is.”

-- **Murrow**, a much-celebrated war correspondent who at the high of the Blitz would deliver reports from London with bombs going off in the background . . . fear for personal safety cast aside.

You may not have agreed with these men all the time, but you recognized them as men of integrity. Heralds of falsehood and fear they were not.

I want this morning to look at Isaiah who was anything but a herald of falsehood. He delivered God’s message without fear or favour.

Legend has it that because of his unbending commitment to truth-telling, he was sawed in sunder. What a way to die!

Moreover, Isaiah balanced the dark, hard bits of reality with luminous, glorious ones. And, that is exactly what we find him doing in this morning's passage.

Chapter 25, from which today's reading comes, appears like an oasis in a desert. All around it are chapters full of gloom and doom.

If we had read the chapter preceding it, this is what we would have found:

“. . . the Lord will lay waste the earth and make it desolate . . . ”

“The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled . . . ”

“The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh.”

Isaiah sees a far-away nation coming in and carrying God's people away. This actually happened around 586 BC. The far-away nation was Babylon.

But why is the trouble coming on God's beloved?

Well, Isaiah does not leave his first hearers nor us in doubt for a minute:

“They [the house of Judah] have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.”

This was no hype from a tabloid, but the Word of the Lord.

But then in the midst of all this gloom and doom comes today's chapter, a chapter full of grace and hope.

Judah may go into exile, but God is not finished with Judah and the world. A glorious new day looms on the horizon.

Instead of a scarceness, there will be a feast of rich foods and the best wines.

Instead of death, life. God, Himself, will wipe away tears from all eyes.

As we noted last week, God's blessings will spill out beyond Israel to the nations. The Gentiles will come and worship the living and true God and have their tears wiped away as well. ////

What about us? Don't we not find ourselves in a similar situation to the people of Isaiah's day, God's own covenant people.

As with them we have been given much. God has shed his grace on our nation. But it seems that in many ways we have done what Judah did.

We have focused more on ourselves than others. We have made pleasure and entertainment our gods. Our worship has been half-hearted. We have replaced God's moral law with "If it feels good, do it."

And the same is true throughout the West. Everywhere we look secularism has made tremendous inroads in the span of my lifetime. A Christian heritage has been set aside.

Some years ago now I was in London and was set to meet some friends from Blue Ridge for the evening service at the Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle. This is the church where the great 19th century evangelist Charles Spurgeon preached.

Unfortunately, it is located in one of most dangerous parts of London. Taxi drivers, I am told, turn off their "For hire lights" when they go through this district. That's how bad it is.

Be that as it may, I took the Underground and arrived safely at the church. As I stood on the lighted portico outside waiting for the doors to open, I was joined by a young Australian working in London. We soon struck up a conversation.

I shall never forget something he told me: **"Britain is living off the spiritual legacy of her past. Blessings continue, but they won't continue for ever."**

Well, this was where Judah was in the years leading up to the people being carried off into Babylon. They were living off the spiritual heritage of their past. And, I fear that is where we are, or at least heading, in this country.

How long will God's blessings continue? We don't know.

But the big question is: How shall we live in such times?

Should we be bowed over with fear, the type of fear that paralyses positive action?

Should we breathe in the noxious air of the heralds of falsehood and fear and not venture out of houses?

Should we become so absorbed with evil in the world that that we allow our worship of God to languish?

Isaiah, the herald of truth and hope, would answer ‘no’ to all three of these suggestions.

Instead, he would tell us to do what he told the people of his day to do: Look up and praise God . . . first of all for His past acts of faithfulness.

Chapter 25 begins with the words: **“O Lord, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast [past tense] done wonderful things.”**

This is no cry of desperation, but a call to worship. He calls the people of his day -- and us -- to remember and praise God.

But we are not to stop with looking back, we are also to set our focus on God’s promises for the future, particularly those pertaining to life and immortality.

Freud is credited with saying: **“And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be.”**

If there were no special revelation, no Bible, no word from the Lord, Freud’s point would be well taken. Life is a painful riddle.

But, what a contrast there is between Freud’s words and those of the prophet: **“He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.”**

And, if we know our Bibles, we know that both St. Paul and St. John the Divine in the New Testament pick up Isaiah’s words and give them fresh affirmation. But the One who give them the biggest affirmation of all is none other than Jesus Himself.

In late winter, have you ever seen a single jonquil bravely sticking its head up through the cold earth sporting bloom? It's a beautiful sight to be sure. But it sends a message: **More flowers are coming. Winter is almost over.**

The same is true with Jesus's resurrection. What happened on Easter morning was more than a great stand-alone miracle. It sent a message: **More resurrections are coming. "Because I live, you will live also,"** says Jesus (John 14:19).

Freud was wrong. Jesus is right.

We have good news. We have been called into fellowship with One who wipes away tears from all faces.

One commentator wisely notes that people shed tears for a host of reasons—illness, financial problems, natural disasters, frustrations, marriages gone wrong, children gone wrong, the loss of a loved one—the list is nearly endless.

Think of some of the things in your life that bring sorrow and pain. Add them to the list. Then look to the God with a handkerchief in His hand. Receive hope and strength to carry on.

We have good news. Don't let your head hang down. Rejoice. Our God – the conquer of sin and death – has come and comes!

I should like to close with a challenge. In a world of lured headlines, resolve to be a different sort of headline, a headline of hope.

Where to begin? How about the checkout counter at your local grocery store?