

Advent 1

A Sunday School teacher asked a class of young boys: *Who blew down the walls of Jericho?*

Following a second or so of silence, a little boy by the name of Billy Green raised his hand and said, **“It wasn’t me.”**

Later, the teacher, expecting to get a chuckle, related what Billy Green had said to the Assistant Minister of the Church. No chuckle came; rather this response:

“Billy Green’s a good boy. If he said he didn’t do it, I’m sure he didn’t.”

The teacher walked away in disbelief. Then around the corner, he ran into the Senior Minister. Thinking he was sure to get a better response from him, he related what Billy Green had said.

He did not. Instead, he got a curt:

“If something was really damaged, report it to the facility’s manager, and he will fix it.”

I begin with this story because there is an appalling ignorance today, even among church people, concerning the Old Testament.

This is unfortunate because the Old Testament provides the foundation for the New.

God did not invade human history unannounced.

The One we call Jesus did not just appear out of thin air.

The proclamation of that thing we call the Gospel did not begin with Peter and Paul. No, it began with writers of the Hebrew scriptures.

The 8th century BC prophet Isaiah in particular should be numbered among the ‘gospel’ writers.

He brings good tidings: God is coming to save His people.

Think of those thrilling lines set to music in Handel's *Messiah*:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. . .

“O Zion, that bringest good tidings . . . lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!”

And, where in the New Testament do we find God coming, God showing up?

What about in today's Gospel?

Here we find what Isaiah saw from afar taking place on earth's stage. The living God in the person of His Son Jesus comes to Zion and to His Temple. That is what the Palm Sunday story is all about.

We need the Old Testament, particularly Isaiah, to understand the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is for this reason that during Advent this year I shall be focusing on **‘The Gospel in Isaiah’**.

In so doing, I shall be dipping into an older Prayer Book tradition . . . one in which a key chapter from this prophetic book was assigned to each of the four Sundays in this season.

This morning, looking at Isaiah, chapter 1, I want to speak to you on the subject of **‘God's call to a nation in trouble’**.

The nation in view in this chapter is the southern kingdom of Judah, but much of what the prophet says, as I think you will agree, is applicable to our own nation at this time.

A Christian song that was popular in the 1970s begins with the words: **“Troublesome times are here, filling men's hearts with fear.”**

The antidote the author gives to this fear (which is still very much with us) is: **“Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon.”**

The Second Advent of Christ is, of course, one of the themes of the season we are beginning today.

We don't know the day or the hour, but we believe Jesus is coming. Ultimately His coming is the hope of the world.

What this coming means is that in the end, **God wins**. Good news indeed and a powerful antidote to all fear.

In the interim, before that event happens, though, I want to suggest that God has work for us to do. We are not to be idle. ///

But, back Isaiah. As today's passage opens, a dark cloud hovers over Judah.

God's people have been disobedient, and a day of reckoning is coming. In particular:

--Their leaders have been taking bribes and not providing for the needy.

--Their worship is a shame. They are going through the motions, saying the right words, performing the right sacrifices, but their heart is somewhere else.

--In the midst of all this, they have left the God who brought them out of Egypt and planted them in their own land behind.

Thus, we hear the prophet, speaking in God's name, say: **"The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know [me]."**

They are too busy leading self-indulgent lives in a time of relative prosperity to look up.

Oh yes, pagan empires around them – at this time the Assyrians – are on the move, but for the most part they are doing what people today are doing, carrying on as usual. Focusing on me and my. Making pleasure their end all.

Isaiah sees the good times coming to an end. Their country is going to be invaded and laid waste.

Where is the good news, the gospel, in all this?

Well, it is nowhere to be found. But, if we carry on reading, it jumps out at us in verse 18.

Here, there is change in tone. Instead of God denouncing their sins and foretelling judgment, He speaks to them as a parent might speak to a naughty child. **“Come, now let us reason together.”**

Then, in the same verse, like a burst of light. comes ‘gospel’, good news:

“Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

“If you will turn back to Me, I will turn back to you and forgive your sins and heal your land.” That is what God is saying.

I wonder if He may not be saying the same thing to us today? “Come back to me America, and I will heal your land. I will banish fear and restore hope.”

Will America heed God’s call? That waits to be seen, but there is no lack of willingness on God’s part.

In modern day America we continue to put “In God we trust” on our money.

Many of the speeches from our political leaders end with the words, “God bless you” and “God bless America.”

But, how much do these outward gestures mean?

Who is our real master? Yahweh or mammon?

Again, might not God be saying to us what He said to Israel of old, “Come, now let, us reason together.” ///

If that indeed is the case, where is renewal to begin?

With the pagans out there on the street?

With the nones – those who claim no religious affiliation and now make up around 21percent of the population in this country?

No, in history renewal, revival, always begins with God's people. A spark is struck which ignites whole communities and maybe even a nation, as happened in the Welsh revival of 1904-05.

That revival had an unbelievable impact on that small country. Some 100,000 people were converted out of a population of 2 million. That is about 5 percent of the population. Another 100,000 came back to the Lord. Lives and conditions were changed for the better. Blessing spilled out to the whole population.

Where did it begin?

Many historians trace it back to a young woman by the name of Florrie Evans who stood up in a Christian meeting and said: **"I love Jesus Christ with all my heart."**

There was something about her simple, heart-filled words which moved others to love Him, and they went out and told still others.

Before long there was an avalanche of souls coming to faith in that small country.

Could it happen again? Could it happen here?

Of course, it could. God is not dead. His power to heal and save has not been diminished as the years have gone by. What He has done in the past, He can do now.

But renewal, revival, calls for a renewed, a revived, people. It must begin in the house of God and among His own people.

As I close, let me encourage you to join with me in praying this simple prayer:

"Lord, send a revival, /// and let it begin in me."