

“Softly, Smoothly” – Isa 40:1-11 – Advent 2 – Dec 4, 2005

Well, if the weather forecasts are right, the drive to church this morning will have been a bit exciting. The forecast calls for some snow for Vancouver overnight, and we all know what snow can do to traffic here! Slipping, sliding, cars careening off of other cars – all to a semi-musical cacophony of bangs and thuds.

The key to driving safely in snow is the soft, smooth use of power. All vehicles have an excess of power – otherwise you couldn’t accelerate – and although you wouldn’t know it from how some people take forever to get up to speed entering a major highway, most vehicles can accelerate fairly well. There is a flip side to this, however, and that is that stopping takes power as well – again, and especially in snow conditions, soft and smooth applications of power. Part of the reason we see so many Sport-Utility vehicles in crashes is that they forget that a car with 4-wheel drive may accelerate better in snow than a car with 2-wheel drive, but it doesn’t stop any better!

The idea of soft, smooth application of power isn’t limited to cars – it also applies to most mechanical devices, and it certainly applies to people, and we see an example of that in our reading from Isaiah this morning. The passage that we heard contains the opening verses of what should be called the “Book of Second Isaiah”, a completely different prophet than the one we hear from in the first 39 Chapters. This later prophet lived among the exiles from Judah who had been captured by the Babylonians. That war had gone badly for the Judeans, as it had been overwhelmingly defeated and its capital city, Jerusalem, had been captured in 597 BC, and King Jehoiachin and his family were taken into captivity. Ten years later, Judah was again at war with Babylon. This time, in 586 BC, Jerusalem was utterly destroyed: its walls were pulled down, the temple was burned to the ground, the royal Davidic family removed from the throne, and many more people deported to Babylon.

If it seems as though preaching from the Old Testament always starts out sounding like a history lesson, that’s probably not far from the case. There’s a reason, though, and that is that we simply cannot take what was written in scripture out of the context into which it was written, because if we do we lose the depth, the richness of the Word God spoke to the people of that day, and thus miss the depth and richness of the Word God speaks to us today.

Take this reading from Isaiah, for example. If we simply read it, hear it, what we have is a bunch of nice-sounding words murmuring about comfort, easy highways, good living – not much different than what you might hear on the campaign trails at any level of government. But if we hear it through ears conditioned by “on the spot” reporting of the dreadful conditions in Jerusalem, say through the graphic and stunning descriptions in the Book of Lamentations, we quickly develop a whole new appreciation for what God was saying through the second prophet in Isaiah. That short book opens with: <Lam 1:3> “Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.”, and continues through dismal descriptions of thirst, famine, slaughter, slavery and oppression. It gives us a heart-wrenching picture of a once rich and proud nation and city brought into abject poverty and despair, a people dislocated into foreign lands to serve at the pleasure of their captors.

These are the people to whom Isaiah was called to bring a message of hope, a message of deliverance. People who would not be able to believe easily, who would hear any message of good news as being another of the lies they were told by their religious and political leaders before the collapse of the wonderful world they enjoyed. People who would need a message strong enough to convince them, even if, or especially if, it was a message of softness and respite.

And so Isaiah’s message begins with a firm declaration. We cannot easily hear the strength in that opening, in large part because of the way our legal system has removed from our daily lives the

details of oaths and agreements. But the people to whom these words were first addressed would hear clearly the claim to a prophetic call with which this passage starts, and more importantly the attestation of two witnesses that affirmed beyond a doubt the truth and veracity not only of the call, but the message that was being delivered through the prophet. We hear these words, and we recognize them as being from the Bible, and so we grant the author immediate authority because the words are from the Bible. But the first hearers of these words would need deep and strong convincing, and the attestation of two witness voices provided that the people would at least listen.

The three-fold repetition in the first verse that Jerusalem had “served her term”, “paid her penalty”, “received double for her sins” was another legal affirmation familiar to the original listeners. (I’m reminded of the triple “I divorce you” that is legally effective in similar cultures today.) Even the word ‘comfort’ in that familiar first verse is plural, implying a repetitive affirmation that the people would indeed find comfort.

The imagery from the second voice, the first ‘witness’, would also be familiar to the exiled Judeans captive in Babylon, because the Babylonians themselves had a practice of making wide, level highways over which they paraded their religious icons in times of celebration and festival. The implication would have been clear, that the living God of the Judeans and the captives from Jerusalem was more powerful than the whole pantheon of Babylonian gods, powerful enough to intervene in history, to raise up and use a foreign king to defeat the Babylonians and not only free the captives but ease their journey home to Jerusalem.

The third voice, the second ‘witness’, provided a theme that echoed from the very pages of Lamentations. A minute ago I read you the first verse from that book, and most of the verses that follow have a heavy, depressing feeling as well. And yet, right in the middle of that short book are several verses that most of us recognize, verses that not only became a hymn familiar to us but is the turning point within Lamentations:

<3:19> The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!

<20> My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.

<21> But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

<22> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;

<23> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

<24> “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

This theme of the constant, unending love and mercy of God is echoed by that third voice with the instruction to the prophet to cry, “the word of our God will stand forever”, and the people who could identify so readily with the protests in Lamentations could, and did, also hear that connection and begin to believe that relief just might be possible by God’s action.

The prophet is then instructed to proclaim from a high mountain, and with a loud voice (both images in sharp contrast to the groveling meekness of the captives) the presence of God among them, complete with redeeming power, a mighty force that will be delivered with the soft smoothness of a gentle shepherd cradling the lambs to his bosom, gently leading the mother sheep. Unbelievable power, delivered softly, smoothly. Just the right combination for a people who had been trampled by the boots of oppression, who needed to be rescued by a mighty redeeming power, who were also terribly fragile and delicate.

And that prophecy, as unlikely as it must have seemed to those suffering pain, humiliation, degradation, and loneliness in foreign captivity, came true. Within a few short years Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and released the captives, who returned to rebuild Jerusalem, complete with a new and magnificent Temple. (That was the very Temple that the disciples of Jesus ooh’d and aah’d over some 600 years later, and of which Jesus said, “these stones will all be thrown down”, the Temple that

would itself be torn down for the last time by the Romans in 70AD.) The word of God proclaimed by the prophet was affirmed by the events of history, and those words were remembered and recorded as scripture.

Some six hundred years later another prophet strode through the land also claiming to be proclaiming a word delivered to him from God, announcing that once again God would intervene with might and power to deliver His people from oppression. This time the world's occupying superpower was the Roman Empire, sending armed forces abroad to deal with insurgents, to "fight the enemy over there, instead of here at home", and who ruled the outlying provinces with a heavy hand. The prophetic proclamation was of a new kingdom of God being near, and a call to repentance.

That prophecy also came true, as the mighty power of God was also delivered softly and smoothly. This time the power would be delivered in the form of a helpless infant, a baby in a manger, the very Son of God who would as the Good Shepherd and in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." This was of course the child whose Advent, whose 'coming', we celebrate this day, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of God, and God's mercies are everlasting, constant, standing forever. If God would intervene in the histories of Empires, if God so loved the world that He would give His only Son, will God not also help you in times of distress? The message from Isaiah, from John the Baptizer, from Mark the evangelist, from all of scripture is a loud and clear and resounding, "Yes!" God has promised to keep you safe, and will do so.

Many, if not all, of us long for God's intervention to be a fiery tossing of thunderbolts, solving and resolving our crises in a blinding moment. Sometimes we long for God's intervention to shake the world to its foundations, to tear the heavens apart and all our detractors apart as well with a thunderous miracle. But we need to see from scripture that God's mighty power is almost always wielded softly, and smoothly, with such divine precision and skill that we don't even see it happening, we only recognize later that it has occurred. It is easy for us to misinterpret the softness and smoothness of God's working as being a lack of power, when in truth it is a demonstration of the ultimate in powerful control.

The prophecies have been affirmed: God's mercies are ever sure, new every morning, and great is His faithfulness. Rejoice in being part of His flock; let yourself be fed by Him, gathered up in His arms and carried in His bosom; savour His almighty power tending you softly, and smoothly.