

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL**

**December 7, 2014**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell, D.Min**

**Text – Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1: 1-8**

It is a long way from despair to hope. Starting on Two Medicine Road and Looking Glass Hill Road not far from Hungry Horse or “Going to the Sun Highway,” it is a trip of some 2,697 miles through eleven states with changing route numbers, rough places of construction and resurfacing, hills and valleys, and twists and turns before reaching the Blue Star Highway, then the Gold Star – and, if there are not too many delays, in about 40 hour you will have come from Mount Despair, Montana in Glacier National Park to Hope, Maine, a long, tortuous road. And so has it been, century after century.

This little Mapquest exercise is more than that, of course. It is a metaphor of what may be the primary message of Advent: hope. Getting to the hope. And sometimes, there is no map, no GPS to guide us or light our path.

That has been the job of prophets – not to foretell or forecast. But to tell the truth – to name what *is* and call us toward what can be if only we will pay attention.

It was so in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in Babylon. The people had been defeated by the Assyrians and were in exile. They believed they had lost the possibility of ever returning home to Judah, to Jerusalem. They believed that their sin, their lack of faithfulness that had separated them from God had casue this defeat and that God had abandoned them. But now, God speaks through Isaiah, commanding that they be comforted, that their sins are forgiven and they have made sufficient restitution and may return.

It was so in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE in Israel where these words of Isaiah are brought forward in Mark’s Gospel. The Gospel does not begin with Jesus’ birth story but with a messenger, John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, not in the Temple to an occupied people under the thumb of Roman rule. For Mark, John represents the predicted return of Elijah to announce the good news of the coming of the Messiah.

It continues to be so now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, here in Galena, in Chicago, in New York and Berkeley, Phoenix and Cleveland. We don’t have the biblical texts and prophets of the former times, but we do have the continuing revelation of our experiences of God in our midst. But I wonder if we are listening.

In many churches, there is more ritual around the lighting of the Advent candle each week. Often there are blue or purple streamers or small banners each bearing one word: hope, peace, joy, and love. And the ritual focuses on the “word of the week.” That word for today, Advent 2, would be “peace.”

Now, these words are worthy ones. As are the Advent concepts of waiting and anticipation. Preparing. Making room for God, for the One to come. We do need to take time to be quiet, to ponder and attend to our spiritual selves as some of us did here yesterday at our Advent retreat. But if we stop there with only the sense that our biggest challenges are busyness and unreasonable expectations for perfect gifts beautifully wrapped, magazine style decorations and holiday meals (that still include all the family traditions), if all we do is address our personal and individual struggles, I fear we have domesticated the voices of the prophets and God's hope for humanity.

These truth-telling prophets are not sweet and mild. And they were not particularly popular because their messages were hard. Repent. Turn-around. Prepare the way.

I confess that I have preached these texts in the way I am now questioning. But, somehow, this year, that approach does not seem sufficient. Please don't tell Emily, the director of the new TriState Choral Society, but I'm feeling rather annoyed with songs about "the sweet little baby," "the little baby boy," this year. Don't tell Emily, because she has me singing the solo descant in "What you gonna call your pretty little baby."

I expect there are several reasons for my annoyance. First off, this adds to the mystique of the "Jesus, meek and mild" picture, a sentimentalizing of what the Incarnation, the coming of God to take part in human life, is all about. It has never been all sweetness and light. It was to change the world – to show us God. To show us justice and love and respect not just for the concept or miracle of "life" but of living human beings with all of their joy and sorrow and the triumph and tragedy that living brings.

And so, my second reason, right now, probably has to do with a vision of sweet little baby boys all grown up, or partly grown, who because of their physical bodies and characteristics create fear in others who have different characteristics. Boys whose mamas have to teach them how to act in the presence of others so they aren't perceived as threatening. Boys – and girls – whose lives every single day are vastly different from what my sons experienced. My heart breaks to read of these indignities, this persistent evidence of inequity and, yes, racism. Oh, yes, and the deaths.

I do not mean to paint these problems with a broad brush of blame. They are far too complex for that – they make up a fabric that has been woven with fear and distrust, violence, and judgment on all sides. I know what it feels like to be unfairly blamed: teachers have felt it when all are being criticized for students' lack of learning. Clergy have felt it in the lack of trust in the institutional church because some have been abusers. And the law enforcement officials are feeling it now because some have misused their power and authority.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore this. It is not a distant problem that affects only other

people. For some of our families, it is up close and personal. We cannot make it the responsibility of those who are mistreated to fix the problem. It is our problem. We are the ones who wake up in the morning feeling like we're ordinary, normal members of society who don't have to be worried about being treated with suspicion or fear.

There are many ways to address this: some of us may be called to be activists, marching or writing letters. For others, it might be praying and trying to model and teach a more open and inclusive way of being. For all of us, it should be about learning more about this systemic issue and the advantages we are born that people of color do not have. And how our words and actions can either heal or hurt another – even when not intentional. What we cannot do is bury our heads in the sand or say that it's not our problem. We have, after all, promised in our baptism or in our reaffirmations, to work for justice and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

I said – or implied – before that we don't have prophets like Isaiah or John today. But how do I know that? Maybe we do. Maybe we just aren't paying attention. Maybe Fr. Flegler from St. Sabina's in Chicago is a prophet. He has called upon churches and synagogues to walk out of their doors today, to disrupt traffic, and to act on their outrage peacefully. A number of churches in our diocese are participating in various ways – , marching, singing, carrying signs, or simply being a presence in the city center. Others have mounted signs on their church property and messages on social media, one of the most popular: #BlackLivesMatter. These are not the first protests, of course. They have been happening in cities across the country. And have been mostly peaceful. A friend of mine from Evanston was in Grant Park the other night. She was very moved by someone leading the singing of "O Holy Night." Particularly the third verse that isn't often included:

Truly He taught us to love one another  
His law is love and His gospel is peace  
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother  
And in His name all oppression shall cease...

Our combined choirs sang this, including the third verse, at the Christmas Concert on Wednesday. I can only hope that these words registered.

It is a long way from despair to hope. Sometimes a tortuous journey. But the prophets also bear a promise. We may need to walk in the wilderness. But the wilderness is not just a scary place of wild beasts and bandits and confused wandering. It is also a place of preparation, of hope, and change. Even a place of beauty if we adjust our eyes. God has promised a highway where the rough places, the rocks, the thorns, the valleys and heights have been smoothed. And God is there with us on that highway. We just have to set out on the journey.

Amen