

“The Light To The Nations”

Isaiah 42:1-9

ADVENT I

December 2, 2018

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Today we begin the church’s Christmas season.

Like a sonata, the Christmas season or
liturgical cycle has three movements-
Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany-

This year the Advent season is contained
entirely in the month of December.

Our worship this morning opens the first of
four consecutive Advent Sundays.

During each successive Sunday in Advent
we will light a single outer candle
on our Advent wreath until all four
candles are aglow on the Fourth
and final Sunday in Advent.

On Christmas Eve, at each of our three
services, we will light the larger
center candle or Christ Candle
signifying the birth of Advent’s
long-awaited Savior- Messiah, Jesus.

This season we will follow the tradition
of naming each candle of Advent
with the hoped- for gifts the Christ
child brings- hope, love, joy,
and peace.

Each week our bulletin cover will
feature the name of each of these
gifts with each letter composed of
biblical words in a colorful setting.

The gift of hope was certainly needed
and prayer for by Israel’s great prophet,
Isaiah, whose ministry was to God’s
people living in Judah and its
capital city, Jerusalem.

Before engaging our text from Isaiah's 42nd chapter that has been assigned by the Narrative Lectionary for this First Sunday of Advent, I think a little background information would be appropriate for and appreciated by those who hear and read my messages.

As our Church year contains three separate and yet connected movements or seasons, the book of Isaiah of Jerusalem also comprises three distinct yet connected books or scrolls.

The first and longest takes up the first 39 chapters and has been called rightly by biblical scholars First Isaiah.

The next or middle section, called second or Deutero- Isaiah covers the next 15 chapters from number 40 through 55; and last or third section has been named Third or Trito- Isaiah, chapters 56 through 66, encompassing the "Suffering Servant Songs" which for many Christians seems to point to and portray the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

It has been only in recent decades that Old Testament scholars see a greater divide occurring between chapters 39 and 40.

In chapter 39, for example, the prophet Isaiah leaves King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem on an ominous note with this prophetic oracle in verse six;
"Days are coming when all that is

in your house and that which your
ancestors have stored up until this day,
shall be carried to Babylon, nothing
shall be left says the LORD.”

And in the next chapter the prophet
begins the fortieth chapter speaking
these words:

“Comfort, O comfort my people.
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from
the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins” (40:1-2).

As you can hear or read between the lines,
there is a great historical gap between
these two chapters- in fact, a gulf
in chronological time of 160 years.

The passage we heard from Isaiah 42
shows God speaking into the pain of those in exile
to send a servant who will bring justices
and not only to Israel but to all the nations.

Through today’s reading we have entered
the middle of the story of God’s people.

This Fall, the Narrative Lectionary has
told this story of Israel’s deliverance,
covenant, monarchy, exile, and return.

Remember how God sent Moses to deliver
his people from bondage in Egypt,
made a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai,
and brought them for forty years through

the wilderness and were lead by Joshua
to conquer Canaan, the Promise Land.

They became a nation and built a temple
for the Lord that overlooked Jerusalem.

For centuries they saw military victories
and defeats under good troops and God.

They strayed from God's commandments
but the prophets called them back.

Then, in the sixth century BCE,
the unthinkable happened.

The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem.

They destroyed the temple, plundered Israel's
treasure and livelihood, took them into bondage ,
and dragged them back to the gates of Babylon in chains,
prompting the writer of Psalm 137 to lament

“By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down
and there we wept when we remembered Zion”.

The Babylonian victory over Israel was
both absolutely and unconditional surrender.

This was utter complete devastation of
the political, social, economic, and religious life
God's people had known and lived for centuries.

For us Americans who have not experienced
defeat and conquest from an outside nation
in our own soul, it may be difficult
to imagine just how devastating it was
for God's chosen people to be handed over
to enemies, humiliated and destroyed,
taken into bondage, all the while then
God did not seem to them to intervene.

The broken and beaten Jews felt abandoned

by God.

How could the God Almighty ever allow
this to happen?

Is God punishing them?

Removed from access to the temple and
to the land, were they still God's people?

Was God still God or were the gods
of Babylon greater and more powerful?

In exile they could only conclude that
God had withdrawn from and allowed
the Babylonians to punish them
for their sinful and disobedient ways.

Into this identity crisis Isaiah speaks
God's word.

The prophet reminds the people who God is
and how God works.

He draws their attention from this particular,
historical moment, to the larger purposes of God.

As Isaiah speaks, it as though we see
the camera lens zooming slowly out
from a close-up shot to a wide-angle view,
a cosmic view, so to speak.

By reminding the generations of the exile
or who God is, how God works,
and what God is doing by sending a servant,
Isaiah expands the frame of reference
relocating and purposing Israel's limited
vision within God's cosmic realm and being

God is the God not of Israel or even of Babylon,
but the one who "created the heavens...
and stretched out the earth" (v.5).

As we read from Genesis back in September,

this is the God of creation,
who made everything that its,
and who dwells in this wide, open
cosmic space, not contained by the
cramped conditions of exile.

This is the God “Who gives breath to the people
upon [the earth] and spirit to those who walk out” (v5)

God’s breath animates not only the people of Israel
but every living breathing creature on this world.

And finally, this is also the God
who reached out to make a particular people
called Israel, to call them to righteousness,
and to keep them (v.6)

This is the God of the universe and the God of Israel.

Isaiah proclaims this God acts in certain ways

First, God sends a spirit-filled servant
not a conqueror or tyrant.

This agent of God will bring justice, not domination

Second, God sends this servant to preserve
until justice is done all the way “to the coastlands” (v.4).

Third, God purposes God’s people to be
“a light to the nations, to open the eyes that
are blind, to bring out the prisoners from
the dungeons, from the prisons those who
sit in darkness” (vv.6-7).

Isaiah reminds this exiled people that
God has not abandoned them but is
indeed at work among them,
restoring them to be a blessing.

That is good news!

God is still God.

God’s people are still God’s people,

yet with a purpose that extends
beyond themselves to all the earth.
Notice that the reassurance Isaiah offers
is not triumphalist trash talk.
There is no plan for revenge,
of turning the tables on the Babylonians,
no “lets kick butt and take names.”
Rather Isaiah shifts Israel’s gaze from
themselves back to the wise scope of
God’s promise and plan for them.
God has a vision for them and their future.

This season of Advent as we light candles,
sing carols, and pray prayers of hope,
we are reminded that Jesus was sent
into this world as a light that
“darkness cannot overcome” (John 1:5),
“a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6)

This pattern or model of servanthood
will continue from Isaiah to Matthew.
In Jesus, God again brings a servant
who will bring justice, who God
“anoints to bring good news to the poor...
proclaim release to the captives, and
recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, and
declare the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19)

Beloved people of God,
during Advent we recognize and receive
Jesus, the servant Savior for the whole world.
The Israelites in exile were summoned
by God from their grief and self-preoccupation
is a greater purpose.

There was work to be done, and Israel is to do it.
Israel is to return to Lion or Jerusalem
to make it a welcome place for the vulnerable
and to transform the Gentile world.

Do you now see where Jesus is coming from,
from a hopeless people who were given new hope
How are we giving the gift of hope
this Christmas season?

Amen