

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Advent 2-C; 9 December 2018  
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

## Isaiah's Dream

*In nomine...*

### I. Intro

Hear the words of the prophet:

*I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."*

These words are familiar to us. These are the words of Isaiah, as he proclaimed a message of liberation and return home to the exiles. These are the words of John the Baptist, found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels as he proclaimed a message of repentance and preparation for the coming of Jesus, who would restore the people's connection with God. These are the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., as he spoke to our nation from atop the Lincoln Memorial, proclaiming a message of equality and brotherhood for every American citizen. These are words of freedom, liberation, and salvation.

### II. Thesis

But freedom from what? Dr. King knew he was proclaiming a future freedom from the scourges of racism, legally sanctioned discrimination, and arbitrary animus. From what was John the Baptist proclaiming freedom?

Note how Luke's Gospel begins our reading today.

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of*

*Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas*

Whew! That's a lot of bureaucracy. Do you feel oppressed yet? These were all the rulers who were pressing claims of hegemony over the people's lives. You have an Emperor, a governor, a ruler all claiming power over the Jews and, if that wasn't enough, we'll list not just one but two names for high priests exercising authority in Jerusalem.

It is in response to all this authority and power and governing that there comes an alternative. We hear it from this guy out in the desert proclaiming a word from God. What is this word? It is a message of repentance and forgiveness. Repentance means turning, changing. Forgiveness means reconciliation. Repentance and forgiveness are the keys to freedom from all this ruling-over and bureaucracy. In the face of all these rulers and their competing claims for the people's allegiance, John reminds them of the God who loves them.

John uses the prophet Isaiah to draw a parallel for the people. Those emperors and governors and rulers are like valleys and mountains, paths that are crooked and rough. They are barriers between where the people are and where they want to go. Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites held in captivity, longing to return home, afraid not just of the rulers that held them captive, but of the long, treacherous journey that separated them from their home. Isaiah proclaimed a public works project, the construction of a graded highway that would "[straighten] the curves, [flatten] the hills" and lead God's people safely home to Jerusalem.

John translates the proclamation of Isaiah as a call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Sin isn't about a list of rules and repentance isn't about being a goody two-shoes. Sin is anything that alienates, that causes a rift in relationship. Repentance is to heal the breach, nurture the relationship, and to stay connected. Sin is what hurts your soul. Repentance is taking your hand off the burning stovetop.

Repentance is to turn away: turn away from the competing claims of authority over one's life. Turn away from the valleys and mountains and curves, the competing loyalties, unnecessary obligations, and disordered affections, that lead one away from a single-hearted commitment to God. Turn away from those habits and practices that alienate us from one another, from ourselves, and from God.

### **III. Good News**

St. Thomas' knows about road construction projects. We have spent a lot of time and energy and money giving expression to our belief in solidarity and relationship. We built a ramp right up to our church building to make it accessible to those who couldn't traverse uneven, 150-year-old steps. We put an elevator into our Parish Hall and a handicap-friendly bathroom.

These are acts of repentance: recognizing that something in our life together was causing difficulty for certain people, preventing them from participating in the full life of the church. We have answered Isaiah's call to flatten the hills and grade the valleys, and when you see that ramp or that elevator, you are seeing the salvation of God at work right here, at St. Thomas'.

### **IV. Invitation**

Of course, life isn't all elevators and ramps, is it? Those physical, visible construction projects are the easy parts. It's the ramps and elevators in our hearts that are more challenging to construct. These are the efforts and habits required to cross boundaries, to overcome hurts and slights, to defy cultural norms of racism and classism and age-ism and whatever other flavor of prejudice you care to name. These are the challenges that lie constantly before us.

Some of the road construction that goes on in our hearts becomes visible in new or renewed relationships, in participation in justice ministries like Kitchen of Hope or Interfaith Hospitality Network or the Giving Trees, and in the decisions we make around work, money, and spending.

All that we do here at St. Thomas' is meant to be repentance and the embrace of forgiveness. All of it is turning away from false rulers like fear, anger, prejudice and anxiety. All we do is about turning instead to God, to God's character of faith, hope, and love. All we do is intended to lead to our own transformation ever more into the image of God. This is the work Isaiah described as building graded, paved roads that would lead us directly into the loving arms of God.

## V. Conclusion

Hear the words of the prophet:

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

*I have a dream today!*

Dr. King had a vision for major public works. His vision was even bigger than the Eisenhower Interstate system. It was a vision he caught from Isaiah and found in the words of John the Baptist. It's a bigger vision, a bigger dream than just one of color and race. Like the dream of a world without racism, it is a vision that remains as yet unfulfilled.

God is graciously inviting us to take part in God's vision, God's dream, God's mission. It was the mission which led Jesus to be born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, and die on the cross just a few years later. It is a vision that only finds fulfillment as we learn to carry the work of Jesus into *our* lives, *our* neighborhoods, *our* workplaces, and *our* church. God is inviting you and me to participate in God's mission of freedom, liberation, and salvation.

Repent! Be baptized! And you shall see the salvation of God!

FIN