

Advent 2, Year B
Sunday, December 7, 2008
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We live in a noisy culture. There are a lot of voices, constantly vying for our attention. Sensational news coverage; advertisers; self-improvement gurus; telephone marketers. The cacophony can be overwhelming. But if we turn off the TV, ignore the phone, and venture off by ourselves for a moment of silence--- our own minds take over. We all have constant noise in our heads, like a radio station promising all talk/ all the time. Monastics and contemplatives agree, turning off the noise in your mind is even more difficult than turning off the noise of the world.

So the Church gives us the gift of Advent. Now you might think, here we go again. She is going to encourage us to be quiet, to slow down, to listen. To take on a new spiritual discipline as we wait for Christmas to arrive. However, Father Parker and I agree that such an Advent message is totally unrealistic.

I think we can all agree that it is virtually impossible, while living in The United States of America during the month of December, not to get sucked in, at least a little bit, by the frenzy, the madness. The highly commercialized and overly sentimental noise of the Holiday season permeates our lives, making some of us happily hyper and some of us sorrowfully sad. Even wonderful charitable efforts, such as our Christmas tree sale, toy collection and sharing of song with shut-ins, can make us feel overwhelmed this time of year.

So how can our faith tradition guide us through the chaos of the next few weeks? How can we savor the gifts of Advent amidst the noise of our lives. Well, Advent actually has its own noise!

Advent has its own soundtrack that we can choose to listen to instead of the Chipmunk's Christmas album. Advent's soundtrack comes from Holy Scripture. Advent's audio features the powerful

voices of our some of our favorite stars. We can call the album:
Home for Advent: the Prophets Greatest Hits.

On track one we have Isaiah proclaiming comfort to the Israelites.

If you would like a musical version, Handel's "Messiah" is a classic. Isaiah proclaims profound words of comfort to the people of Judah as they continue to live in exile among the Babylonians.

Remember, at the time of Isaiah's prophecy, which most likely dates around 540 BCE, God's people have been conquered, deported, and are living in a far away place amongst strangers. The presence of God can no longer be linked to the land, the temple of Jerusalem, and the monarchy. Living far from home, the people wonder where is God now? Isaiah proclaims the imperative words of prophecy: "Comfort, O Comfort my people. Say to the cities of Judah, here is your God." And the truth of these words resounds across space and time. God's faithful presence remains steadfast, even in the midst of the darkness and loneliness of exile.

On track two of our Advent album, we hear a prophetic voice ringing forth about 500 years later. John the Baptist, another favorite prophet, proclaims with great fervor and style that people need to repent of their sins in preparation for the one who is coming. John the Baptist embodies the ancient presence of the great prophet Elijah by living in the wilderness and wearing strange clothing. Like popular bluegrass singers of today give contemporary voice to the songs of previous generations, John resignifies the message of Elijah for his present situation. John speaks prophetically that right here, right now, something big is about to happen. Turn around and Get ready! Prepare the way of the Lord! The one we have been waiting for is about to enter our midst, and he will baptize you with the very Spirit of God.

We take time this morning to listen, carefully, to the soundtrack of Advent, to the prophetic voices of Isaiah and John the Baptist. We also listen carefully to see if there is a third track on the album—a contemporary voice from our present lives. Is the prophetic

message of old being proclaimed in your life in new ways? Advent calls us to listen to the noise of our lives with the songs of the prophets ringing in our hearts. Advent beckons us to pay attention to God's prophets of today, also crying from the wilderness . . .

The third track on our Advent albums might differ from one to another. However, the message will always resonate with the same truth proclaimed by Isaiah and John. Some clear examples of modern day prophets are Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Desmond Tutu. Their voices challenge and comfort us, empowering us more fully to follow the ways of our loving Savior, caring especially for the poor and oppressed. This fall, a prophetic voice has come clear to me. From two different but trusted sources, a prophetic message has arisen that challenges me to listen and respond. The words first came from the Presiding Bishop when she spoke with the clergy this fall. Then the message was reconfirmed by the young adults coordinator for the diocese of Atlanta who spoke at a conference I attended last week. Their prophetic message resonates with the truth of biblical prophets.

And it is a message that does not necessarily make me comfortable. The message is this: “The Good news of Jesus Christ needs to be shared more fully with Young adults through the ministry of the Episcopal Church. Reach out, reach out, share the Gospel beyond your comfort zone, beyond the walls of the church building. Be willing to let go of practices that exist only to preserve the institution. Let go of old notions of being Church. Share the love of Christ boldly and creatively. Even when young people don’t call back, respond to emails or show up. Keep striving to reach out and generously share the gift of love without lots of unhelpful strings attached.” I share this message with you as an example of a modern day prophetic voice that I have personally encountered, but also because we, as a community, have entered together into an outreach ministry for the young adults of the Armstrong Community. St. George’s already incorporates several young adults as full-fledged members of our worshipping community. The prophetic voice I have described challenges us to continue in this to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to a

generation that has not necessarily grown up in the Church, or doesn't feel at home in worship on Sunday morning. And this is not an easy task in our apathetic and noisy culture. The mission involves clarifying the evangelistic message to meet the sound bite standards of today and sharing it with the certain risk of rejection. It involves setting aside the desire to sit back and wait for others to come here and incorporate themselves into this community— instead going out and meeting them where they are, allowing new opportunities for Church to happen. I look forward to working more closely with those of you who share the sense of call to outreach among the young adults in our neighborhood. Is there a voice in your own life, calling forth a response in you? Perhaps you have heard the voice and filed it away under unnecessary noise. I encourage you to Prayerfully listen to discern if there is a prophetic message in your life, inspiring a new vision for living as God's beloved in the world.

The gift of this Sunday in Advent is the gift of the prophetic voice. Isaiah gives comfort and hope; John offers examination and preparation. We listen and their voices become our soundtrack for the season, opening our ears to perceive prophetic voices of today, pointing us to new pathways of righteousness.

The prophetic voices seep into our minds and our hearts, becoming the wonderful noise of Advent. If you are in exile, take comfort, God is present. If you are distracted, get focused and prepare the way of the Lord. With the guidance of the prophets in our lives, we await with joy the very presence of Christ in our midst.

But, as we reflect on the Gospel today, I would like to follow the lead of our rector. Last week he took the realistic approach in the Sunday insert—acknowledging that to some extent, for the next few weeks, we will all be running around like chickens with our heads cut off, either trying to outdo Martha Stewart with our seasonal perfectionism or trying to avoid painful situations in our lives. So Father Parker does not exhort us to drop everything and commit to two hours of silent prayer everyday of Advent. However, he does ask us to be mindful as we shop or bake or decorate or cope. To remember what we are really longing for, what we are really waiting for. And I have been at St. George's long enough to know that you all already have a strong sense of what is really important in life—your faithfulness to God and generosity to the needy of our world is continually inspiring. The life of this church family is an Advent witness, a community that provides a beacon of light in a dark, dark world.

uses some of Isaiah beloved words of proclamation, reframing them to the situation at hand. Sort of like a remix, when young singers join older singers, giving a new spin to an old classic, the prophets of our canon often resignify words of earlier prophets.

This practice calls attention to the immediate circumstances in ways that connect with the traditions of faith. In the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel account, we encounter a prophetic voice-- using imagery from Isaiah, Malachi, Moses—calling us to

prepare the way of the Lord—to welcome God into our very midst.

Just as Isaiah spoke from the land of exile, this prophecy comes forth from the wilderness, announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ's coming. John the Baptist exorts.