



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 2, Year B
December 10, 2017

[RCL] Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Isaiah 40:1-11

Many scholars identify this oracle as the beginning of “Second Isaiah” (Isaiah 40-55), in which a disciple of the earlier prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem takes up some of the themes of the oracles recorded in “First Isaiah” (Isaiah 1-39) and applies them to the later experience of the 6th-century BC exile in Babylon. The overwhelming theme of these chapters is consolation in the face of despair; the prophet speaks from a sense of joyous certainty that the people of Israel will be restored to their homeland.

This message of God’s tender, shepherding love has inspired generations of poets; many Episcopalians know it well from Catherine Winkworth’s hymn, *Comfort, Comfort Ye My People*.

- Where do you see people in exile in your life? In our world? How can you proclaim a message of comfort and consolation, even as they remain in the midst of despair?
- What does it mean to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (v. 3)? How can we make highways in our churches for God to pass through?

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Psalm 85 connects with the themes of forgiveness and consolation in Isaiah 40. It carries an interesting balance between the past and the present, from “You have restored the good fortune of Jacob” (v. 1) to “The Lord will indeed grant prosperity” (v. 12). Has God restored the people already, or is God going to restore them in the future? The same past/future tension appears in 2 Peter 3 and in Isaiah 40. This psalm, like many others, reminds God—and the people singing or hearing it—of God’s saving work in the past, as part of a prayer for God to do the same thing in the present.

- How has God acted in your life in the past? How does this give you hope for the future?

2 Peter 3:8-15

Even in the earliest years of the Church, when some parts of the New Testament were still being written, many people who had been taught to expect Jesus’ imminent return had become worried. While scholars debate whether this letter was written by the historical Peter (in the 60s AD) or by a later Christian writing in the voice of Peter (in the second century AD), the problem is the same. It’s been years—where is Jesus?

The author of 2 Peter attempts to comfort these Christians, telling them that God’s time is not like our time. Just before this passage, the author has encouraged his audience to ignore the scoffers who say, “Where is the promise of his coming?” Instead, the author exhorts them to remember that Jesus could return at any time and that they ought to live in patient “holiness and godliness” (v. 11).

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- The author says that God is patient because God “does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (v. 9). How does this fit with what you believe about evangelism and the relationship of Christians to people of other faiths?
- Think about a time when you have suffered. Would you find the message of God’s patience comforting? Why or why not?

Mark 1:1-8

The opening verses of the Gospel of Mark set the stage for the entire story of the life of Jesus. Mark is the earliest gospel, and scholars believe Matthew and Luke drew on it. It begins late in Jesus’ life, at the beginning of his ministry. The first verse announces the theme of the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” “Christ” and “the Son of God” both carry political connotations in their original context that may be obscure for modern congregations. “Christ” is well known as the Greek translation of the Hebrew term “Messiah,” or “Anointed One,” which refers to a king or priest. “Son of God” was not a “theological” term in our modern sense, but one of the political titles of the Roman emperors since Augustus.

- Why is it “good news” that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the King, the Son of God? What does it mean to spread that news in our world today?
- The gospel uses two of the verses of today’s reading from Isaiah to introduce John the Baptist, who is himself “one crying out in the wilderness.” If you heard about a modern-day John the Baptist, eating insects and preaching in the desert—how would you respond?

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