

December 11 – Isaiah 42:1-9

Sometimes, the best way to start a sermon I've struggled with is to just say, I struggled with this one. Which is actually kind of odd, because normally I love Isaiah, and this is usually one of my favorites.

I think part of it is that while God might be declaring new things, I'm not sure I see them. I'm sort of in this mood where I feel like I've preached the same basic sermon too many times. The prophets aren't helping. They have lots of different poetic and symbolic ways of getting their message across, but it's the same message.

OK, so before we go on, what two things do the prophets rail against? ...OK, we've got that covered.

The criticism the prophets level against their own ruling class and upper class invites intense scrutiny of our own economic and political systems. Sometimes it's hard to see that much has changed. We still have a huge wealth gap, the poor and working class still don't see justice. Violence is still an issue. Eyes are still closed to the suffering around us. Prisons are still full, in some ways justly and some not.

Closer to home, we likely all know people who are struggling...a lot. I have some in my family. There's a lot of uncertainty in our lives and in the world around. And to top it off, our elderly dog keeps peeing on the carpet.

It's not the worst Advent I've ever had. But it's not the most joyful either. I feel a little bit like that bruised reed and my faith feels a bit like a dim wick.

But that's the thing about Advent. If everything were always grand, we wouldn't need a savior, we wouldn't need Christmas and Advent just wouldn't exist.

If you're feeling lots of peace and joy this season, that's great. Today's reading and sermon may be something you hang onto for a time when you're not.

Faith in the ordinary day to day stuff, and in the joyful times is truly a gift. Faith really becomes faith when you can't see much of anything to hang onto, but you do anyway.

Today's passage from Isaiah comes from what is commonly called second Isaiah. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah were written by Isaiah, son of Amoz. The second half of Isaiah probably has multiple authors.

Although the alternating themes of judgment and hope appear throughout, judgment and warning figure more prominently in the first half and promise and hope in the second.

This passage was written to a people in exile. The warnings of the earlier prophets had come true. Most of the best and brightest of Judah were either killed or captured and taken to live in Babylon.

Exile for Judah was a political reality. Exile remains a political reality. There still exist exiles. With refugees and asylum seekers, they are people forced by circumstances to leave the country they'd rather live in if they could.

But exile had a spiritual aspect too. When God's people were taken into exile, their sense of God became much more complex. On the one hand, they remembered all the times the prophets warned them. They knew they'd been wrong.

But the punishment seemed to outweigh the crime. It seemed that God had abandoned them. Or maybe Yahweh, their God, really couldn't stand up to the Babylonian gods. What good was a powerless god? And worse, it seemed God had given up on them.

They knew they had failed, but had God really given up on them?

They were alive, but it sure seemed like an awful lot of what they relied on had died. They couldn't even sing anymore - How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land, they lamented.

Into that abyss, Isaiah wrote these words. Classically there are four servant songs in Isaiah. This is one.

Who is the servant? That's a good question. This text gets applied to Jesus later on. Our gospel reading has part of it pretty much word for word.

But it first applied to Israel itself...God's chosen people. I am the Lord, says God through the prophet. I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you.

God has not given up on them. God has not abandoned them. It is still God's plan for them to be light to the whole world. That bruised reed will be gently healed and the dim wick of their relationship with God would not be extinguished.

That glimmer of hope...hope that comes from knowing that God still chooses them...is truly a glimmer. They're still in exile. But it won't be forever. God will rescue them.

And out of the exile the people will come, shaped by a refiner's fire. That's the new thing God will do. New creation is really what it is. From the beginning, God has fashioned a people to live together in peace and harmony. It started with Adam and Eve. Each time there is a disruptive event, God reforms that people. After the flood, creation is restarted, and Noah's family becomes the basis for that new community.

God's actions at the Tower of Babel cause that community to spread...to be fruitful and multiply – to become the many nations.

Through Sarah and Abraham God created a whole new people – Israel – to be the light to those nations. To show the nations what life with God can be like.

God forms them again as a people after slavery in Egypt and gives them a code for that life with God.

The promise here after the exile is that God will once again reshape them into the people called to be light. Ultimately, God does. Persia defeated Babylon. King Cyrus let the people of Judah return and they begin the job of becoming that community – that light – once again.

Israel after the exile never recovered the power and glory of her best days. And honestly, it's probably powerlessness that did enable them to be more faithful to the God who redeemed them, over and over. They were made new, even if it wasn't what they envisioned.

But it's not the last new thing God will do.

In a stunning move, *God* will become the servant. God, who through the word created the entire universe, will become flesh. Jesus will be that servant as a perfect representative of Israel. Jesus will be the light who brings justice, not by might but by love.

We may not be political exiles. But at one time or another we've all faced the spiritual experience of exile...a feeling that all has gone wrong and God seems distant.

But it's just when we are bruised reeds and our faith is a dim wick, Jesus sits with us gently and loves us back to faith.

The light begins with Israel. Then Jesus. Then through the risen Christ and the power of the Spirit, we are called to be light. We are called to gently hold the bruised reeds and nurture the weak flame of faith in one another.

So maybe now, some of you are like me – struggling to see the light, let alone be the light. When I read the prophets and remember everything that has gone before, I'm reminded to look for those glimmers of light. And when I begin to look for them, they are there.

I can see glimpses where God is acting. Often it's small things. But honestly, even on a global scale, there are things that are better. Poverty, at least in developed nations, is nowhere near what it once was. Safety nets and the abolishment of things like debtors' prisons means poor people do have a chance. And even in the two thirds world, globalization has had an impact on poverty.

Medical and scientific advances have benefitted pretty much everyone, even if health care still isn't equitable.

But mostly, years of living in faith have taught me that it's often when things seem bleakest, that God is laboring the hardest to bring something new into being.

That little flame doesn't seem like much to hold onto. It's hard to not be able to see better...to see the future...to see God at work. But for me right now, that glimmer is just enough.