

Scripture Readings and Sermon

December 15, 2019 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Isaiah ends the promise of a Messiah in Isaiah 11 with, "there shall be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt." Isaiah will pick up this image of a highway in 35 and 40. Isaiah 40, according to modern scholarship, is the beginning of "Second" Isaiah. This division, however, ignores the fact that Isaiah 36-39 is a retelling of 2 Kings 18:13-20:19 and simply provides a historical flashback to the fall of Jerusalem. Isaiah 35:8 speaks of "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way" just as Isaiah 40:3 continues with "make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Another theme that connects both passages is "wilderness". After the judgment of the nations in Isaiah 13-24, Isaiah begins a series of woes and blessings. One of these blessings can be found in Isaiah 32:14-16, "For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks; until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field." Isaiah 35 continues this theme with "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad" which is echoed in Isaiah 40:3 "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD'".

Commentary on James 5:7-10 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

After criticizing the wealthy in the church community, James urges the community to wait patiently for the Jesus' return. By referring to the early and late rains, James is referencing Joel 2:23, "be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before." It is within that same chapter that Peter explains Pentecost with Joel 2:27-29, "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." James is reminding the community that Jesus' return is near and that the Holy Spirit is in their midst if they but wait patiently.

Commentary on Matthew 11:2-11 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

In Matthew 10, Matthew recalls the sending out of the twelve disciples after Jesus gives them fairly detailed instructions. If, however, Jesus is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit then why is Jesus sending out his disciples? This appears to be what John heard when it says, "what the Messiah was doing". If Jesus is just another teacher with disciples, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus responds to John with Isaiah 35 which can be connected to Isaiah 40 used to describe John (see Isaiah 35 commentary). Jesus then uses Malachi 3:1, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight". This is why Jesus says that John is more than just a prophet because John is the messenger of the covenant - Jesus. The passage from Malachi goes on to describe Jesus in much the same way a John describes Jesus' form of baptism, "he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap". What is different between John's expectations and the reality of Jesus is that it is the life and teachings of Jesus that will burn away the false righteousness of the day. No one will be able to stand before His truth.

Sermon "Who Are You Waiting For?" (*Sermon Video*)

When Leo Tolstoy wrote "Martin: the cobbler", it is doubtful that he knew at the time that it

would become a classic Christmas story told around the world. In this story, an old shoemaker in a small Russian town heard the voice of Jesus while he napped saying to him the day before Christmas, "Tonight I am going to visit your village. Watch for me." The old shoemaker jumped to his feet and rubbed his eyes. Jesus was coming to visit! What could he give Him? As he looked around his small house he realized all he had to give him was a warm blanket, a hot drink, and some soup and to eat. He needed a special gift so he decided to make his finest pair of shoes. But what size were Jesus' feet? He would need to make a pair of his finest shoes in every size, and Jesus could have the pair of shoes that fitted Him best!

As the shoemaker began to make the shoes, he heard a noise outside but it was just a young boy lighting lamps along the street before it got dark. His coat was threadbare and he shivered as he worked. "How cold he looks," thought the old shoemaker, "I could give him my blanket, I still have other gifts for Jesus." He shuffled outside with his blanket and wrapped it around the shoulders of the young boy. The boy stopped shivering, smiled gratefully, and went on his way.

The shoemaker returned to his shop and carried on working but soon heard voices outside. He saw a group of children singing carols and said to them "You must be so thirsty after your singing. I have hot drinks warming on my stove. I was saving them for a special guest, but I'm sure He won't mind. I have other gifts for Him." He poured them hot drinks and waved them goodbye.

No sooner had he gotten back to his work than he saw the figure of a poor widow and her children wandering the cold dark street. How hungry they looked. "Come in and have some of my soup," said the kind old shoemaker, "I was saving it for a special guest, but I'm sure He won't mind. I still have another gift for Him." The poor widow and her children thanked the old shoemaker and went on their way.

He worked all night on the only gift he had left, the shoes but Jesus never came. The old shoemaker stared out of the window on Christmas morn and tears streamed down his face. As the sun rose in the sky, he looked across the street at the orphanage and thought of all those children. He gathered up the shoes into a sack. Then he tiptoed across the street and into the orphanage where he placed a pair of his finest shoes by each child. Then he tiptoed back to his shop, sat in his comfortable chair, and closed his eyes.

As he dozed, he heard a voice saying, "Thank you kind shoemaker. I visited you last night and you gave me warmth. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was hungry and you fed me. I was in the orphanage and you came to visit Me. Thank you for giving me the finest pair of your shoes. Whatever you did for all these people, you also did for me." Just then the Christmas bells rang out across the village as the orphans woke to find their gifts.

Jesus came to the shoemaker, but he was waiting for someone else. I wonder if John the Baptist felt the same way. While the gospel writers describe John as Isaiah's "voice crying in the wilderness", Jesus describes John as Malachi's "messenger of the covenant". This messenger was supposed to come before the fearful "Day of the Lord" Malachi writes about in Malachi 3. The Messiah is "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap". John's earlier description of Jesus at the threshing floor and with an ax seems to fit this image. If this was what John was waiting for, then this healer and teacher from Nazareth must have been a disappointment. Instead of overturning the corrupt religious leaders of the day, Jesus was sending out disciples in pairs to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

John was expecting a Jesus more like the one described in James, "the Judge ... standing at the doors". This view of Jesus fits what Harry Emerson Fosdick would label B.C. rather than A.D. The coming of Jesus brought a new covenant and a new understanding of Messiah. Instead of the "warrior god who smites our enemies", the Messiah is one who conquers the Enemy. He is the deliverer of sin's captives, the finder of the lost souls, and the healer of the brokenhearted. Jesus is the one who gives sight to the blind, causes the lame to walk, "the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Jesus is the promised deliverer of Isaiah who will

bring the people home with "singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Is this the Jesus you have been waiting for?