December 10, 2017

Second Sunday of Advent (B)
Isa 4:1-5, 9-11; Ps 85:9-14; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

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In the reading from Isaiah, the people of Jerusalem, a broken and depleted city, are assured that their loving God is coming to bring them comfort. They have suffered terribly. Now that suffering is over, and God comes to comfort them. It is appropriate that the route of God’s triumphal procession be in good repair and made as picturesque as possible. This requires hard work. But it is the LORD who is coming, and “the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,” and so the hard work must be done. The image of God presented is one of tenderness, like that of a shepherd who cherishes and cares for the sheep. This is a very moving scene.

The gospel reading from Mark contains a reference to this Isaian passage, with a slight though significant change. In Isaiah, the way of the LORD is in the wilderness; in Mark, the voice is in the wilderness. Despite this shift, both passages cry out: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” However, the reference is not the same. Isaiah is referring to YHWH, the Lord God as worshipped by the ancient Israelites; in Mark, John is referring to the messiah. This is clear from the opening biblical quotation ascribed to Isaiah, but really containing a passage from Malachi as well. It is Malachi who speaks of a messenger who will announce the coming of the messiah (Mal 3:1, 23). This passage is included because John was understood to be that messenger. Furthermore, John is not referring to the birth of a child, but to the coming of the messiah in power, “one mightier than I.”

The reading from 2 Peter speaks of the coming of the ‘day of the Lord.” Many people understand this to be the time of utter destruction of the world at the end of time. However, it is really a creative apocalyptic way of taking about what came to be known as “the birthpangs of the messiah” – the suffering that brings new life into being, not death. This new life is the “new heavens and new earth” for which we all long. What we sometimes forget, is that Jesus said that this “new heaven and new earth” would be born in our time and in our world, not in some other time and place. He called it the reign of God.

Ancient Israelites looked forward to the coming of God, and they had to work hard preparing for it. John announced the coming of the messiah, and he called the people to repentance. We too are challenged, for we do not merely await the coming of the day of the Lord, the new heaven and the new earth, the reign of God. We bring it to birth, amidst pain and suffering. We bring it to birth as we work for a more just society, a society of openness and hospitality, of diversity without rancor, of peace that stems from respect. God’s comfort comes into the world through us; we are the heart and hands of the messiah; we are the heralds of a new heaven and a new earth.