

From today's first reading, from the prophet Isaiah:

"They shall be called the oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display [God's] glory..."

I need the sturdy words and images of Isaiah.

Terra firma. Solid ground in these dizzying days.

So this week I made sure we're getting not one, but two, readings from the prophet:

one, already heard, our reading from Isaiah chapter 61;

the other, in a few moments, this week's litany inspired by Isaiah chapter 52.

I need – we need – a double-dose of Isaiah this week.

Isaiah is a major prophet, meaning *long* – 66 chapters, comprising a legacy so rich that it represents generations of inspired messengers of God.

The two passages we hear today are only a few chapters apart, but from different generations.

The passage we'll hear in the litany, comes earlier, at the end of the Babylonian Exile, when the people were dislocated and despairing.

The passage we heard as the first reading, is from later as the people are moving beyond Exile, returning and rebuilding in Jerusalem.

And, yet, in both passages – not only chapters, but decades apart -- the message is much the same.

Both celebrate the very presence of God's messengers.

One is clothed in garments of salvation; the other has "beautiful feet."

But what really marks them is the common content:

News so good as to be quoted by Jesus in one of his first sermons proclaiming liberty to the captives, comfort for those who mourn, raising them up from years of devastation.

Or, as the other reading says –

announcing comfort, redemption from the ruins,
the promise that God still reigns.

How striking that whether lost in exile or back home rebuilding,
they need to hear the same message.

The end of exile and the beginning of restoration
didn't make everything all-better overnight.

They still needed comfort, reassurance, good news.
Even after they got what they thought they wanted,
they needed comfort, reassurance, good news.

Here we are in a precarious state of pandemic,
enduring a lengthy exile of sorts from life as we know it.
Yet we're told, and can see for ourselves, that things are getting worse.
For many of us, the virus is hitting closer to home.
Public health officials warn us to expect
the hardest, darkest, worst few months in U.S. history.
Trends of infection rates, and more tragically mortality rates, bear this out.
Several of our nation's deadliest days have taken place, in rapid succession, this month.

At the same time, there are glimmers of light at the far end of the tunnel.
Vaccines that seem to have higher than expected efficacy
are on the horizon.

Many of us saw that charming grandmother receive the first vaccine
this week in England.

It should soon be available over here as well, with deliveries arriving
in parts of the country as early as tomorrow morning.

And yet, it will take months – perhaps the worst months of this whole drama –
for the vaccine to reach most of us. For things to get back to normal.

Or will they? Will they, ever, really get back to normal?

As much as I'm looking forward to the end of this era,
I think we know (if only deep in our hearts) that
there's not going to be a magic flick of the switch,
as if all this never happened.

"February 2020 ain't never coming back."

Things will be forever different. We'll be different.

And maybe that's not all bad.

But there's one thing that is steadfast
amid the chances and changes of this mortal life.
Like the people Israel, whether in the bad old days of exile or
the new beginning of restoration,
whether in the despair of exile or the disillusionment of restoration,
they still needed God's promise of comfort, of hope, of liberation.
And so will we.

Let's prepare ourselves now.
Immerse ourselves in a double-dose, triple-dose of Isaiah.
Hear the echoes of his times in our own.
Look for messengers of God come bearing good news.
And, yes, like Isaiah, like John the Baptist whose witness we also heard today,
like so many throughout history whose names we'll never know,
we brace ourselves for the hard truth that sometimes
the messenger is us.

So let's use this time, these remaining days of Advent,
this Christmas, the dark and difficult months ahead,
to be formed into the messengers that God --
each other and all our neighbors -- need us to be.

How beautiful are the feet (and everything else)
of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces salvation,
who says, "Our God reigns."

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