

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 20, 2008
Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

“Looking Back and Looking Forward”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

We have reached the middle of the Epiphany season already on this bitter cold weekend in January. With the start of Lent just 17 days away, this shortened season is fast approaching its conclusion. When a sports team reached midseason, it is often a good time to look back and look forward to evaluate things. The texts for this day give us the same possibility as they summarize and anticipate the themes of this season as they are centered in the revelation of Jesus Christ. So as we consider the Lord's word today we do so "Looking Back and Looking Forward"

I. The Servant

The Old Testament lesson has been called the second servant song of the prophet Isaiah. It makes a good place for us to start looking back. In fact it allows us to look back all the way to Christmas. Now it is interesting that a passage written 750 years or so before the fact could be so instructive, but that is a striking reminder of the prophetic word and of the eternal and wise plan of the Lord. The servant is speaking: "Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name." Should we not remember the earlier prophecy of Isaiah about the virgin and her son, Immanuel. Should we not remember the words of the angel to the virgin Mary and also to Joseph that the name of the child would be Jesus for he would save his people from their sins. And the song of the servant speaks of this as well: "And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength -- 6 he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." In the Hebrew the word "My Salvation" is literally his name: Yeshuati--My Jesus! But these words also give us a chance to look back to Epiphany. For the Lord tells his servant who in an earlier verse is named Israel for he will bring back the lost of Israel, that he will be a light to the nations (to the Gentiles). Here is promise of salvation to the ends of the earth. Here is the hope of all of lost mankind. The promise of the Lord is for all people of every nation. And so the magi came and so the word spread out. On the white banners in the chancel is the Jerusalem cross--which is a fitting reminder of the spread of the word--You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea in Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Also in the Old Testament lesson, we look back a week to the Baptism of our Lord. The closing verse states: "Because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has

chosen you." We are reminded of the word of the Father from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased." The servant, the chosen one of the Lord, is his beloved Son. And as the New Testament quotes from several of these servants that becomes quite clear.

II. The Lamb of God

As the Old Testament lesson has allowed us to look back, the Gospel lesson for today gives us a chance to look forward. Though it also contains a bit of a look back—John in pointing to Jesus says of him: "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." Here is a very clear reference to the baptism of Jesus. In fact,

John the Baptist speaks clearly of the descent of the Spirit as a dove. And so he also bears witness that Jesus is the Son of God, as the Father also witnessed from heaven: "This is my beloved Son." But the chief theme of the Gospel lesson would have us look forward—past the end of Epiphany to Lent and to the culmination of our salvation in the sacrificial work of our Lord. For as John sees Jesus coming toward him, he speaks clearly, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Behold, the Lamb of God. What images this should bring to our mind. We may be rushing the seasons a little, but it is never an inopportune time to speak of the Lamb. The picture itself is full of the thought of sacrifice. The spotless Lamb, the perfect Lamb. Abraham speaking to his son Isaac on the mountain of sacrifice: "God himself will provide the lamb." The children of Israel painting the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their homes as the angel of destruction and death passed over. And so it would be, for "Christ our passover lamb is sacrificed for us." In the Old Testament song of the servant, there is also a rather striking reference to these events: "Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: 'Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves'..." And that reminds us of another servant song, the one in Isaiah 52 and 53 which begins with the words that the servant was so disfigured that men would hide their faces from him. And then later the prophet would continue: "Like a sheep led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." Behold the lamb of God.

But as John so rightly witnessed, the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. Here is Epiphany again, the light of the Gentiles will take away the sins of the whole world. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not counting their trespasses unto them."

III. Follow Him

And John's witness to the Lamb of God led several to follow him. We have Andrew and another disciple who hear the witness and follow Jesus. And Andrew in his eagerness finds

his brother Simon and tells him “We have found the Messiah (the Christ)” and he brought him to Jesus. And Simon who in the verse following would receive another name from Jesus, Cephas (rock) that is, Peter, would follow as well.

Let us then as we look back and look ahead, as we wonder at the fulfillment of the word of the Lord and sure and steadfast hope which is ours in Christ Jesus, follow as well. And in following we too can witness and share that the world may know of the love of the Lord in the servant who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

In the closing word of the epistle for today, St. Paul puts it very well: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” As we sang just before this message:

I was so lost, I should have died,
But you have brought me to Your side
To be led by Your staff and rod,
And to be called a lamb of God.

O Lamb of God, sweet lamb of God,
I love the holy Lamb of God!
O wash me in His precious blood,
My Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

In His name. Amen.