

THE PROPHETS OF OLD: CHRISTMAS



Isaiah 9:2 "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness --- on them light has shined . . . For unto us a child has been born, a son (is) given to us; (and) authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."

Over a period of some twenty years between 1769 and 1788, a former soldier and a member of the British parliament named Edward Gibbon devoted his considerable genius to writing an epic chronicle of the decline of the once great Roman Empire. This continuous narrative in six volumes, entitled "The History of the Rise and Fall

of the Roman Empire," was distinguished by its rigorous scholarship, its historical perspective, and its incomparable literary style, and is arguably the greatest historical work in any language --- and surely the most magnificent narrative history ever written in English. It was a passionate work struggling more than a thousand years after the fall of the once great city of Rome to make sense of the tragedy of the decline of the Roman Empire, so great was that fall.

Tonight we celebrate the inspiration of another group of writers, the prophets of the Old Testament, who like Gibbon, were passionately moved to make sense of the fall of another great empire, the empire of King David and his son Solomon. For over the last four weeks, I have preached about the Prophets of old, because within their writings is born the hope and dreams of a Messiah, whose birth we celebrate tonight. For under good King David and then his wise son Solomon, Israel had become a united and prosperous country like it had never been before, occupying a larger territory than the modern state of Israel, from the Tigris River in the north to the Red Sea in the south. Those were the glory days; when the boundaries of the kingdom were expanded, when magnificent buildings were constructed, like David's royal palace and King Solomon's magnificent Temple in Jerusalem, when there was peace with their neighbors, where literary circles flourished, and commerce was so prosperous that foreign

royalty, like the Queen of Sheba, came to pay homage to the kings of Israel.

However, when King Solomon died in 922 b.c.e., his sons fought over control of his throne and ended up dividing the once great realm into two nations: the Northern Kingdom called Israel and the Southern Kingdom called Judah. Thus began the decline of the once great Davidic Empire.

The Old Testament prophets tried to interpret these tragic events as they unfolded, tried to explain to the people what was really happening and why, understanding themselves to be messengers from God Himself, speaking God's very words to the people. The prophets were not soothsayers or fortune-tellers who predicted the future, as we so often think, though they did at times make predictions about the future, and were at times mistaken in those predictions. Nor was the prophets' message solely about impending doom and the end of the world. No, instead the prophets were individuals who passionately proclaimed what others would not see or could not admit to. They were old men who saw what was happening, and its consequences, and then dreamt dreams of what could be, of what should be, of what would be. And when words failed them, the ancient prophets often resorted to extravagant actions to illustrate their message from God, and to call all people to repentance, to change the way they were living.

For instance, when the Assyrian Empire rose in the East and threatened the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the prophet Hosea foretold doom for Israel if she didn't repent, didn't change her ways, because she lacked faithfulness, the Hebrew word *hesed*, most often translated in English as 'steadfast love.' This is all that God desired of Israel, that she be as faithful to God as God had been faithful to her. Hosea used his marriage to illustrate this point, for directed by God the prophet Hosea married a known prostitute, but treated her with love and respect. Yet even so Hosea's wife eventually left him and became a common harlot again, and went whoring about until misfortune so overtook her and she was forced to give herself up into slavery. Yet even then, in response to God's command, Hosea ransomed his wife, that is, he bought back his own wife in the slave market and restored her to a place of honor in his house as wife, and as the mother of their children. That is how much God loves us, said Hosea, that even though Israel has been shamelessly unfaithful, God remains steadfast in God's love for her.

But the people would listen to Hosea or to Amos, so in the first months of 721 B.C.E., the Assyrians came and leveled the capital city of the north, Samaria, and then the Assyrian King deported more than 27,000 Israelites into the far off regions of Persia, where they were dispersed forever. The Assyrian King then repopulated Israel with colonists from Babylonia, Elam, and Syria, who became the hated "Samaritans" of the New Testament. Finally the words of the prophet

Amos' famous funeral dirge became translated into historical reality: "Fallen is the virgin Israel. No more to rise." The Northern Kingdom was no more. For they had not heeded the words of the prophets and so those ten tribes of Israel were lost forever.

When the Assyrians marched on toward Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah's message to the people of the south was a simple one; "Trust in God; be quiet and keep calm." "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength" (30.15). And for reasons that remain historically unclear, the Assyrians suddenly gave up their siege and withdrew from the south, and Jerusalem, the royal city of David was spared. Jerusalem was indeed the only city besieged by the Assyrian Empire that was not taken. The Greek historian Herodotus says that the Assyrian army was struck by a pestilence of mice, perhaps suggesting bubonic plague. Still the words of the prophet Isaiah had come true. Israel needed only to be still and trust in God.

A hundred and twenty years later, the Babylonian Empire arose as the dominant power in that region and it too lay siege to Jerusalem. The prophecies of Isaiah were remembered and cherished, as were those of Amos and Hosea, and the people of the southern kingdom of Judah, the Jews, were confident that no one could ever conquer Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah, however, agonized over the people's incurable conceit. They were, he said, a "people with a stubborn and rebellious heart." Writing some of the most beautifully lyrical passages in the

Old Testament, Jeremiah expressed his fears of their impending destruction. With the urgent voice of a prophet, he sounded the battle alarm, saw in his mind the army approaching in chariots like whirlwinds and cried out to Jerusalem to repent while there is still time (5.13-18). His heart beat wildly as he heard the enemy trumpet and saw disaster suddenly overwhelm the land (5.19-22). He heard Jerusalem's death cry, like the piercing shriek of a woman in labor (4.29-31). And finally Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem; just as Jesus was to do later (8:18-9.3).

For in 590 b.c.e. Nebuchadnezzar began a terrible 18 month siege against Jerusalem. Bread was so scarce that the people resorted to cannibalism; mothers boiled their own children to eat (Lam. 4.10). Death stalked the streets and came in at the windows (9.21). Still Israel, said Jeremiah, was like clay in the potter's hand. If the vessel was spoiled, the potter could rework the clay as he saw fit. This is what God was going to do with the people of Israel, Jeremiah said, and then he prophesied a new covenant (31.31-4), not written on tablets of stone as was the old covenant with Moses on Mt. Sinai. "For I will write this covenant on their hearts and place it on your lips."

Eventually the Babylonians broke through the walls of Jerusalem and took down the city stone by stone, obliterating the Royal Palace and the Solomonic Temple, then burning what remained to the ground, while carting the survivors off like cattle to exile in Babylon.

Ezekiel was one of those carried off earlier into exile and he spent the rest of his days prophesying to the Jews in captivity, trying to make sense for them of this great tragedy and what it meant. He was the counterpart to Jeremiah who had been left behind in Jerusalem. Ezekiel's message to the people in exile became one of hope, as expressed, for example, in his famous passage of the valley of dry bones that God brings back to life, or in his poetic image of God as the Good Shepherd caring for his scattered sheep. As in the case of Jeremiah, Ezekiel insisted that God was going to make a radical change in his relationship with the people. "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a new heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes . . . and you will be my people, and I will be your God." (36.36-8). In words later so clearly echoed in the Book of Revelation, Ezekiel envisioned a new temple, in a new Jerusalem, with a new David as king again. Thus with Ezekiel and Jeremiah and Isaiah, we find the beginnings of the notion of a Messiah, of an anointed son of David who would come and rescue God's people from captivity.

Comforted by the words of the prophets of old, the Jews in exile were captivated by these lyrical images of hope and rebuilding. Captives were told that deliverance is on the way. The brokenhearted were comforted. The prisoners were to be set free as the excitement and expectancy of great events were about to come to pass. There in

the prophets is heard the voice crying out in the wilderness, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, to bring the mountains low and raise up the valleys, for a new Exodus and a new Davidic king and even a new Creation, where the lion will lay down with the lamb and eat straw like the ox. Indeed Israel's redemption was now envisioned as part of the salvation of the whole world, for Israel was to become a light to the nations.

For Christians, the words of those prophets became so clearly fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Indeed the New Testament took its very name from Jeremiah's prophecies of a new covenant, which were also echoed in the words of Jesus at the Last Supper as he "took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to (his disciples), saying, 'Drink this, all of you; for this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (1 Cor. 11.25; Lk. 22.20; Mt. 26.26-8). Christians saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of a mysterious Servant of the Lord, a man of sorrows, one acquainted with grief, a suffering servant. Through Jesus' vicarious sacrifice, Christians understood that a new Israel was gathered around him, and that the doors of the Kingdom of God were thrown open to all nations. The whole of Israel's history came to focus and fulfillment in Jesus.

Thus it is not surprising that according to the tradition, Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue at his home in Nazareth by reading a passage from the scroll of Isaiah and then announcing that

"today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Lk. 4.16ff)." From the tragedy of the fall of the once great Davidic Kingdom, new hopes and dreams emerged out of exile in Babylon, fueled by the dramatic visions and wondrous images of the prophets of old. For these visionaries tapped into a deep seated human longing for salvation and for a better world, where the lion lays down with the lamb, where justice rolls down the mountain like a stream, where there is peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. It was a dream, a dream that we still hold dear.

So we celebrate this night the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of those prophetic hopes of redemption. Out of the great tragedy of the fall of ancient Israel rose the promise of a new heart and a new spirit, a new covenant with God. Here is born the beginnings of a new Exodus, a new Jerusalem, indeed a new Creation, where a long-expected son of David would inaugurate the Kingdom of God. And the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. . .' Or in the words of the Christmas hymnist, 'the hopes and fears of all the years are born in thee tonight.' AMEN.