

Natalie Gould
Santa Teresa Parish
ILM Old Testament Course, Fall 2002

The Prophetic voice and the Call to Social Justice

A proposed session for the Santa Teresa Parish
Faith Formation Program, Adult Session
December 10/15, 2002

Nov 1, 2002
ILM, Hebrew Scriptures
Instructor: Dr. Catherine Murphy

[Faith Formation is the Catechetical program of Santa Teresa Parish. The hour and a half sessions are for people of all ages...4-104, and are based on the liturgical year, trying to both reflect the season and weekly readings, while covering a comprehensive Catechetical Study. We begin and end in prayer together, and study and reflect on the same topic while meeting separately in peer groups. The staff of Santa Teresa prepares the adult session, each taking a different section. The session is repeated on two days for about 35 adults each time. The adult session begins with a small group faith sharing, listening and reflecting upon one of the recent Sunday scriptures, and then opens up into a teaching session that can be a mixture of lecture, group discussion, and other activity.]

A. Opening Prayer [5 min]

B. Dismissal into Catechetical Groups [5 min]

C. Breaking Open the Word [20 min]

-The adults are broken into small groups and given the scripture to read out loud twice, each time reflecting on a different question.

Scripture Passage: John 1: 6-8, 19-23

1. What word or phrase speaks to you?
2. What does this passage call you to in your life of faith?

D. **The Prophetic Voice: Examining Isaiah 40** [15 min]

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-The Adults re-gather in the large group for a teaching and reflective talk covering these four areas: [See attached draft of talk]

1. The Prophets and Prophetic writings
2. The Historical Isaiah 40
3. Isaiah meets Christ: reflecting on the Christian perspective
4. The Prophets call to Social Justice – How does Isaiah speak to us in the season of Advent? A time for personal reflection and group brainstorming

E. Catholic Social Teaching [20 min]

-A talk and teaching session on Catholic Social Teaching. Connecting the call of Jesus and the Prophets, it should cover the central areas, beliefs and history of the Church's Teaching. It would outline broad themes of CST, but hopefully narrow it down to a few expanded issues to bring life to the

doctrine that may seem overwhelming to some. This time could include some small group discussion, and large group feedback.

F. Social Justice in our World [10 min]

-A brief conclusion to the session, tying in the themes of being called to action and social justice by the Prophets and by Jesus. Giving some practical ways we can implement Social Justice Teaching in our lives here in the Santa Clara Valley, as residents of the US, and members of the Global Community. This could be a time to provide them with information on specific issues, ways they can participate in the parish or local community, and information about different Catholic activist groups such as PAX CHRISTI USA and Network social justice lobby.

G. Announcements [5 min]

-Program announcements for Faith Formation and general announcements for Parish activities, especially services, events and outreach programs during the remaining days of Advent.

H. Closing Prayer [5 min]

The PROPHETIC Voice: Examining Isaiah 40

Draft for Reflective talk by N. Gould

In next Sunday's Gospel passage from John that we have just reflected on, we hear again the word's echoed throughout the Advent Season from John the Baptist: "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" These are words we do not hear *once* this Advent season, but three times. Last Sunday we heard them from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, and from their origin, the book of the Prophet Isaiah. In fact, this passage from Isaiah is used by all four Gospel writers to describe the preaching of John the Baptist, and the Coming of Jesus. It is so much associated for us as Christians with John the Baptist, that we might forget its ancient roots and history for the Hebrew people. However, it is important that we examine these roots to understand what an early Christian, a Jew, might hear. Let us take a few minutes to look into the original passage to understand its historical and literary context. I will propose that through this exploration, we will gain richness, and a deepened understanding of its symbolic meaning to us as Christians.

The passage we hear in the Gospels comes from the book of the Prophet Isaiah Chapter 40:3-5. [Read passage and have on an overhead] The prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures represent the sermons, writings, visions, dreams, and ecstasies of the series of Israelites chosen by God to be prophets to His people, to receive communications from Him and give them in His name. The early prophets are written *about*. For example we hear *about* Elijah and Elisha's prophecy and ministry in 1 and 2 Kings, but do not have writings *from* them. These are contained in the books referred to as the "former

prophets” [Joshua-2 Kings]. Later we have the group of prophets whose words we can study. These, including Isaiah, are known as the “latter prophets.”

Prophecy is rooted in a historical context. Its writings are not written *to be* History, but they do speak to a people living in a specific social and historical context. Prophecy is not recording historical facts to create an anthology of the Hebrew people, nor is it looked at as a fortuneteller foreseeing acts of the distant and unreachable future. It is a mark of the continued relationship of their God in their *present* lives. The prophets communicate judgment of the people’s moral conduct and that of domestic and foreign governments. They speak of their *contemporary* situations, and call for reform and change within their societies, all in light of, and rooted in, the continued reliance and relationship with their Creator, Yahweh.

As we look more specifically at the prophet Isaiah, we find that the Book of Isaiah is in fact composed of three different prophets writing over a number of centuries. The first Isaiah writes in Judah, the southern kingdom, during the time of the threat of the Assyrian empire, during which time period the Northern Kingdom of Israel is conquered and collapsed. Our passage however comes from the beginning of Second Isaiah, written during the exile of the Hebrew nation by the Babylonians. Second Isaiah therefore is written not from Judah, the Promised Land, as First Isaiah is, but from Babylon. One important thing to mention is that Second Isaiah, being called by God to prophesy, could have used his own name. Instead as a disciple of the writings of First Isaiah, some 150 years later, he writes from the Isaiah tradition.

I. Brief segment of the tradition of 1st Isaiah: speaking against oppression and injustice, calling for fidelity to God.

II. Expand on 2nd Isaiah: speaking in hope of God’s promise in the time of exile, prophesying that God’s anointed one, Messiah is found in Cyrus, of Persia, (a gentile), who would overtake the Babylonians, and return the Hebrew people to Zion, [Isaiah 45].

And so finally we come to the passage we have reflected on today: Isaiah 40:3-5, “Prepare the way of the Lord!” We now see that for the exiled Second Isaiah “the way” was a literal path: the road back to Jerusalem, the journey to the Promised Land, a return to Zion. We hear then that the road of the journey is made easy, the way is prepared: “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low.”

If the writer of Second Isaiah was not directly prophesying the coming of Jesus, and in fact calls Cyrus, a political ruler of a pagan empire, “the anointed one,” does the power of those prophetic words somehow lose validity in our lives?

The Gospel writers chose words from their tradition. They saw scripture as the sacred word of God. By choosing the WORD of God to describe the ministry of John and the Coming of Jesus, they expressed the deep sanctity of the Gospel story. God’s word becomes God in flesh. In this sense they do not mince their words. By associating John’s ministry with Isaiah, they say listen, this is the story of God’s covenant, of

Yahweh's relationship with his people. *This* is the story of God's continued presence in our lives. *This* is a prophetic voice.

By choosing Isaiah, a prophetic voice, the Gospel writers show that:

- God is communicating to us in the life of Jesus
- God calls us to reform, to justice and to reconciliation
- There is hope in God's covenant; trust in God

If we read into this passage deeper, perhaps we can reapply the historical context of Second Isaiah to our own time. We have found that Second Isaiah prophesized the return of the Judaic nation from exile in Babylon to Judah in the 6th Century BCE. As Christians today, we do not have a physical Promised Land, but we do live in hope of, and are called to build, the Kingdom of Heaven. If we are a people living in "exile" from our "Promised Land," what in our society are the things of "Babylon?" For example: materialism or racism. What are other "isms" or parts of our culture that surround and exile us from being within the Kingdom of God? [Encourage adults to give examples]

In Second Isaiah, the prophet restores hope in the fidelity of God in time of trial, he confirms the promise of the covenant. We as Christians see Jesus as the *reality* of God's fidelity and covenant, and find in him hope in the time of trial.

As I have discussed, both the prophets and Jesus call God's people to reform, to justice and love of neighbor and of God. As 'exiles' perhaps we must live counter-culturally, perhaps we are being called to make ready the way to Zion, to the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus has promised. What are the valleys today that need to be raised before the "glory of the Lord shall be revealed"? Or the mountains that need to be made low in our contemporary world so that all may journey into the Promised Land? [Encourage adults to give examples of obstacles that block our way]

We find that our tradition, all the way back to our Hebrew roots, calls us to be a people of justice, in light of our covenant our relationship with God. And so let us return to the season of Advent, of John the Baptist crying out as "Isaiah the prophet said". We are in a time of waiting, restless waiting for the entry of the light of life to our world, the Prince of Peace. Perhaps we groan in anticipation, as the Hebrew who awaited their release from exile. As we wait in this time of Advent, let us remember that Jesus has called *us* to be light in the world. Let us remember, *we*, through are relationship with Christ, are covenant with God, are called to prepare the way for justice and peace in our world.

References:

New American, Catholic Study Bible, Oxford edition

Boadt, Reading the Old Testament, an Introduction, Paulist Press

Murphy, Catherine, Lectures: Hebrew Scriptures Module, ILM Fall 2002