

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 22, 2019

Solemn Evensong & Benediction

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Isaiah 42:1–12, Revelation 12:1–10, Isaiah 7:10–14

If you are a regular churchgoer, the lessons that we heard tonight are not unfamiliar. The first lesson is one of four songs from what scholars call Second Isaiah, chapters 40 through 55 of Isaiah—the first 39 chapters are known as “First Isaiah” and there’s a “Third Isaiah,” too: chapters 56 through 66—three books, or should I say, three scrolls in one. First Isaiah is dated to the period before the exile from Jerusalem, the second to the period of exile in Babylon, and the third to the period of restoration under the Persians.¹ Tonight’s Old Testament lesson, again, the first of these four songs, is known as the Song of the Suffering Servant. It’s heard every year at the Eucharist on the First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The late Passionist scholar Fr. Carroll Stuhlmüller, used these words to describe this servant’s work, “[He] accomplishes his mission modestly and quietly, not whipping people into conformity but transforming

¹ Martin A. Sweeney, “Isaiah,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 965.

them interiorly.”² John the Baptist didn’t receive the same word as Isaiah about working modestly and quietly.

Matthew quotes the beginning of this song³ to explain why Jesus, though healing all, orders those who are healed “not to make him known.”⁴ The song is also appointed every year for Monday in Holy Week.

A little digression, since Matthew’s quotation is never read at a Sunday Eucharist, I’ve never looked at the Hebrew or the Greek. The Hebrew word used in Isaiah means slave or servant.⁵ The first definition of the Greek word used by Matthew, however, is “child.”⁶ There’s something tender about that. I wonder if this is a gentle way that Matthew tries to preach about Jesus’ humanity.

Advent may be the best season of the year for Sunday Evensong. There’s something quiet about the liturgy of

² Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Deutero-Isaiah,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 370.

³ Isaiah 42:1–4.

⁴ Matthew 12:16.

⁵ Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldean Lexicon* (Zondervan, 1850, reprint 1980), *s.v.* “עֶבֶד,” 583.

⁶ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* “παῖς,” 750–51.

these weeks. Advent remains—in the worship of parishes like ours—an invitation to prepare to celebrate the feast of Jesus’ birth “modestly and quietly”—not to jump the gun too much.

Our second lesson tonight has its own complications. Dominican scholar Wilfred J. Harrington writes that the woman represents the bride in the Revelation to John, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; that is, the New Jerusalem.”⁷ But that’s not all that’s here: “[The woman] brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations.”⁸ Mary’s part of the apocalyptic vision too. In their own way, both of these lessons take us from the Lord’s birth and the Lord’s death, to the Lord’s resurrection.

Finally, at Benediction we will hear more words from Isaiah before the exile, words quoted by Matthew from the Greek Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el.”⁹ For the record, Isaiah

⁷ Revelation 21:2.

⁸ Revelation 12:5.

⁹ Matthew 1:23.

in Hebrew identifies this mother simply as a “young woman.”¹⁰ Happy Advent.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁰ Isaiah 7:14.