

Thursday in the Second Week of Advent

December 10, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Isaiah 41:13–20; Psalm 145:1–7; Matthew 11:7–15*

This morning, when I woke up at about 4:30, I didn't get up. I turned on Channel 13, the Public Broadcasting Station, with the volume low, rolled over, and slept some more. When I woke again, a program called "The Ornament of the World" was on.¹ I hadn't heard of it. It's about the period in Medieval Spain when instead of strict boundaries among Christians, Jews, and Muslims, each of these communities was profoundly influenced by the other two. The military successes of the Christian kingdoms would conclude the expulsion of Jews, Muslims, and the persecution by the Inquisition of converted Jews and Muslims who had tried to stay. But early on, it was different.

Abraham Ibn Ezra was a twelfth-century Jewish poet and scholar born in 1092 in Tudela, an inland city 180 miles northeast of Madrid. Tudela was then part of the Muslim Emirate of Saragossa. Alfonso I, king of Aragon and Navarre, took the city in 1119. I mention Ibn Ezra today because he is credited as being the first

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/show/ornament-world/>, (accessed 10 December 2020).

commentator on the Book of Isaiah to write that the author of what we call the first 39 chapters of the book did not write what we call chapters 40 through 66. The first 39 were written before the exile. In 1775, a German theologian, Joseph Christoph Döderlein, supported this position—I don't know if he was aware of Ibn Ezra's work. In 1892, Bernard Duhm, a German Lutheran theologian, argued persuasively that the final chapters, 56 to 66, belong to the early Persian period, after the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus.²

Today's first lesson is from the period of exile in Babylon. Its words are a prophecy calling for trust, hope, and faithfulness: "For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I will help you . . . I will help you, says the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.'" ³

There's a famous short story, its title taken from the beginning of Psalm 137, a psalm from the time of the exile, "By the Waters of Babylon," by the American writer Stephen Vincent Benét. He was only 44 years old when he died in 1943, here in the city. The story is

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.), 366.

³ Isaiah 41:13–14.

described as post-apocalyptic. It was a response to the bombing of the Basque town Guernica in 1937 by German Nazi and Italian Fascist air forces. It was written two years before the Manhattan Project's start, six years before Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁴ It ends on a note of hope—easy to read online.

This morning, we had news from our sister parish St. Bart's. They are suspending in-person worship from today. They do not expect to be open for Christmas—though the Episcopal Church will broadcast three services from St. Bart's for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Let me say that I can imagine closing our doors again if medical facilities are in danger of being overwhelmed by an increase in hospitalizations—but that hasn't happened yet. I certainly acknowledge that there is reason for concern. But I think that the protocols the civil authorities have established seem to be working for religious institutions. I worry more about being in a grocery store, where capacity is no longer monitored, than being at Saint Mary's for

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/By_the_Waters_of_Babylon, (accessed 10 December 2020).

worship. I hope very much we will not have to close again.

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

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