

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

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CHAPTER 35 IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

The words of Isaiah have been speaking to us in the Sundays of this Advent. The chapters attributed to him have a primary place in the Hebrew Bible and are sometimes referred to as "the Gospel within the Old Testament." Chapter 7 identifies the prophet as living in the days of Ahaz, king of Judah. "Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shearjashub (3)." (The name *Isaiah* is given to many Jewish and Christian boys, but somehow *Shearjashub* didn't catch on.)

Were the pages that bear the prophet's name composed by more than one writer? Researchers debate this question. Certainly the Isaiah who addressed the king wrote down some of the oracles but others probably came from a later period. Whether we owe this book to one or more persons, its value is inestimable.

It is helpful to mark up the passages that are especially comforting and reassuring. Some parts convey a deserved anger against those who have forsaken the Lord and the *Torah*, a word which means teaching. But as a messenger of consolation, Isaiah stands out prominently. He also turns to those who had forsaken the way of righteousness but later repented. You can hear the strong notes of his voice, "Say to those who are frightened. Be strong. Fear not" (35: 1-6).

All of Chapter 35, which we hear the third Sunday of Advent, lifts the spirit. Be sure to read it over whenever you need someone to give you comfort. The ancient Hebrew writer wants to do that for you. Starting with Chapter 35, you will find that the chapters whose number ends in the digit "5" contain wonderful lines to strengthen your spirit. That means Chapters 45, 55 and 65 (from line 17 onward). In the places where God's wrath is emphasized, God's mercy soon takes over.

The Book of Isaiah emphasizes the holiness of the Almighty and the seal of holiness on all that the hand of the Creator has brought into existence. Such a God is a living God, not a deity remote and unconcerned with what has been made. This God is faithful to the promises that assure salvation through a Redeemer Who will enter a world so much in need of Him. Songs are blended in with exhortations and narrative accounts.

Chapter 35 sings in poetic lines that emphasize contrasts. It invites us to hope that what is taking place can give way to something much, much better. In periods of uncertainty when a situation seems fraught with danger and unhappy possibilities beckon, we turn to One Who is in control. Life may seem to have led us into a dry period where our efforts have not borne the fruit we had counted on. We are told of a future that will transform what takes place now. "The desert and the parched land will exult. The steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers and rejoice with joyful song." These words can apply to debilitating circumstances when many difficulties overwhelm us. "Strengthen the hands that are feeble. Make

firm the knees that are weak." We are called to walk forward, sure that the Providence of God overshadows each step. "It is for those with a journey to make, and on it the redeemed will walk. They will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee." We all have a journey to make, one laid out for us. We search for the footprints of a Savior who has gone on ahead. Sorrow and mourning may flee as Isaiah sang, but in this world of time, they can return. Yet we know that ultimately they will truly flee away.

Joy and gladness are not only at a distance. An overshadowing Providence accompanies us right here, and our vision needs to be directed to the marks of divine mercy and love everywhere around us. "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened; the ears of the deaf be cleared ." Are our eyes sometimes closed to the evidence of goodness close by? Do we sometimes lack appreciation for family members, for fellow-workers, for neighbors? Do we too often reach a negative appraisal of them as we arouse our critical faculties?

Advent is a time to celebrate human nature since God, in a wisdom beyond our understanding, chose to embrace it. A divine Babe's gurgle opens our ears to the wonder of human beings fashioned in the image of God. It may take an effort to recognize how God appears to us through the lives of others. It is an effort supremely worth the energy applied. Then Isaiah's lines truly come alive. **"They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God."**

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