

## LENT WEEK 3

March 15, 2020

### READING

Draw near, O nations, to hear,  
and give attention, O peoples!  
Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;  
the world, and all that comes from it.  
For the Lord is enraged against all the nations,  
and furious against all their host;  
he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.  
Their slain shall be cast out,  
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;  
the mountains shall flow with their blood.  
All the host of heaven shall rot away,  
and the skies roll up like a scroll.  
All their host shall fall,  
as leaves fall from the vine,  
like leaves falling from the fig tree.  
For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens;  
behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom,  
upon the people I have devoted to destruction.  
The Lord has a sword; it is sated with blood;  
it is gorged with fat,  
with the blood of lambs and goats,  
with the fat of the kidneys of rams.  
For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah,  
a great slaughter in the land of Edom.  
Wild oxen shall fall with them,  
and young steers with the mighty bulls.  
Their land shall drink its fill of blood,  
and their soil shall be gorged with fat.  
For the Lord has a day of vengeance,  
a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.  
And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,  
and her soil into sulfur;  
her land shall become burning pitch.  
Night and day it shall not be quenched;  
its smoke shall go up forever.  
From generation to generation it shall lie waste;  
none shall pass through it forever and ever.  
But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it,  
the owl and the raven shall dwell in it.

He shall stretch the line of confusion over it,  
and the plumb line of emptiness.  
Its nobles—there is no one there to call it a kingdom,  
and all its princes shall be nothing.  
Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,  
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.  
It shall be the haunt of jackals,  
an abode for ostriches.  
And wild animals shall meet with hyenas;  
the wild goat shall cry to his fellow;  
indeed, there the night bird settles  
and finds for herself a resting place.  
There the owl nests and lays  
and hatches and gathers her young in her shadow;  
indeed, there the hawks are gathered,  
each one with her mate.  
Seek and read from the book of the Lord:  
Not one of these shall be missing;  
none shall be without her mate.  
For the mouth of the Lord has commanded,  
and his Spirit has gathered them.  
He has cast the lot for them;  
his hand has portioned it out to them with the line;  
they shall possess it forever;  
from generation to generation they shall dwell in it.  
The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;  
it shall blossom abundantly  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.  
Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who have an anxious heart,  
“Be strong; fear not!  
Behold, your God  
will come with vengeance,  
with the recompense of God.  
He will come and save you.”  
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.  
For waters break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.  
And a highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;  
the unclean shall not pass over it.  
It shall belong to those who walk on the way;  
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain gladness and joy,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

## REFLECTION

The first portion of this reading is difficult. It's difficult to understand, to digest, to accept. It is one of many passages that are all of the above. It causes me to wonder about God's character. How is it that destruction can come from the same God who uttered the world into being? I'm not a theologian. But I do think that it's important to read through all of the Bible, not just the parts that we like or comfort us. The truth is, not all parts of life do we like or find comfort in. Very often, so little of what we experience seems to make much sense. And so, if nothing else, we can recognize the bleak picture that is created in those words.

In its totality, I read the above passages as the inverse of the creation story and fall. It is the story of destitution to redemption. It opens with chaos and the elimination of human existence. God is angry; much more angry than he was with Adam and Eve who sinned and threw all of creation into disarray. He is bent on wiping out Israel's enemies. The imagery is vivid and a direct contrast to Genesis 1 where we go from: "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth" over to today's reading:

"All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree."

Princes are wiped out and the land returns to a time when only animals roam the earth. I wonder if this is God, exasperated by his creation, wanting to reverse course and start all over again. God is indeed, directing his ire to Israel's enemies in the start of this passage. But we can read examples all through the Old Testament of when he was equally as angry with Israel too.

Suddenly, however, the words begin to turn towards a message of hope. Water will satiate a parched land, the weak will be strengthened, and joy will make its return. This God who had a sword dripping with blood now is coming to save us. It made my head spin a little the first few times I read it and, truth be told, it still does. But these passages make sense in light of who authored it: Isaiah, the historian; Isaiah, the prophet. They are an accurate reflection of the history of human existence after the fall looking for redemption.

God meets us in the context of our lives and has from the beginning. Adam and Eve sinned; he made them clothes. The history of the world is all about the rise and fall of empires, of nations, of individuals. He meets us in this new world order; an order not of his choosing. He walks in the battlefields, in the palliative care units, in the refugee camps, and in the back lanes where human beings are being trafficked. None of this is what he desired when he created the universe, and he too lives with the consequences of our sins. I can understand why it makes him so angry...and yet...and yet...

There, in the middle of all that darkness and destruction, he makes for us a highway of holiness. Why? Because he is fixed on his original design for us - to live in complete fullness and communion with him within the brokenness that we find ourselves in. What does that mean exactly? Sometimes I get lost in "Christianese" and I wonder if it's really that good; in my mind good and mostly easy should be interchangeable. I have an inkling that if we think of our most joy filled experiences, when we felt most free and whole, it pales in comparison to what God intended for us. Those are just passing glimpses meant to wet our appetites or give us a bit of reprieve in the midst of the darkness.

So we walk; walk on that highway of holiness. Through the battlefield. Through the open fields. Through the dark of the night and the break of light at dawn. We walk towards God and with God; towards the cross, with a cross, and because of the cross. Dark and light; a God of miracles who works within the confines of the mundane.

## **REMINDER**

God is here with us. The cross was a long way off when Isaiah wrote these passages. A lot of was yet to come, just as it is for you and me. Some of it will be hard and ugly. Some of it will be good and filled with joy. Some will be just down right boring. But as you set out each day, see yourself on that highway. You are not journeying alone or without purpose. Set one foot in front of the other and keep going. You will get there; we all will get there. God is with us.

## **PRAYER**

God, our lives are full of paradox - dark and light, good and bad, joy and sadness. Just as these passages are hard to read and understand, so is life. But you meant for nothing to be skipped over in our journey back to you. So when we are afraid or tired or frustrated, nudge us to come alongside one another and fix our eyes on you. May we experience, in a very real way, God with us.