

“Saved and Sanctified” Mark 1:9-10,
Isaiah 64:5-9 Advent1B 12-3-17

Our Old Testament text is a three part movement reflected also in Mark, and in our own lives.

In the first move, Isaiah voices the hopes of a people oppressed by Babylon. Mark describes the Messianic hope for deliverance of the Jews from the heavy hand of Rome. Today’s global Church seeks relief from ridicule, harassment and murder.

God’s people echoed Isaiah’s plea to God: “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down” and the Palm Sunday cry, “Hosanna, Save us Now”. The church prays for safety and health. As citizens, our votes invoke the political gods, “Protect our lives, our freedom and our money.” But what kind of saving do we need?

Isaiah recalled the acts of God that freed his ancestors from Egypt, sustained them in the desert, and conquered their enemies. Now how about wiping out Babylon? The crowd welcoming Jesus was stirred by His resurrecting Lazarus and his years of healing and deliverance. If he could raise the dead and cast out demons, He can cast out Romans and raise Jerusalem to glory.

We think back at the past glory of our nation. Founded with the fear of God and respectful of individual rights. Immigrants burst their chains of poverty and religious oppression to prosper under new-found freedom. When we feel those freedoms threatened we call out for relief. But what kind of freedom do we really need?

The second movement in Isaiah is toward answering that question. It was Israel’s sins that brought God’s wrath and oppression against them. Babylon and Rome did God’s bidding to make Israel acknowledge that they had strayed from God. Even their best works were as filthy rags. God had hidden his face from them because they no longer sought Him. So, our greatest need is salvation from sin, not from foreign enemies or any invasion of our civil rights.

The recent exposes of famous men exposed for their callous disregard of sexual morality is but a sign that our society has for too long shaken off the law of God and ignored lessons of history. It makes even those who are not guilty of particular sins ponder how by their silent tolerance they also share in the guilt.

Though to acknowledge our sins is painful, it is the first step toward salvation. Until the law brings pain and regret to our conscience, we do not realize how much saving we need. Without the sting of the law, we do not understand how far we have fallen, inch by inch, compromise by compromise. Isaiah acknowledges Israel’s guilt and that God’s punishment is justified.

So His third movement moves far from asking God to harm his enemies. With his eyes focused on his sin, he moves toward God’s mercy. ***Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever.***

At Christmas, known only by a few angels, wise men, and his parents, Jesus does come into a world in need of saving. He is born under the law in order to fulfill it. As the spotless Lamb of God He is the perfect sacrifice to carry the guilt of humanity’s rebellion.

Now when we sing Hosanna, we ask to be saved, not from hardship only, but from sin. That is the one prayer God has already answered. He saved us by bearing his cross to set us free from sin’s eternal punishment.

Today He answers our hosanna with the sound of absolution in our ears, in the water of baptism on our heads, and through the consecrated bread and wine in our mouths. All that he gave on the cross he keeps giving in these means of grace through His Church.

Lest we be too passively content with being saved, let us seek also to be sanctified, or holy. By his blood, we are already holy in God’s sight. Yet what we are by grace, we are always to become by grace. We humbly see ourselves as clay to be continually shaped, molded and used by our divine potter for whatever purpose He determines.

Salvation and sanctification are summed up by Paul in Ephesians: ***by grace you have been saved through faith. That is God’s gift. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*** Don’t let grace be wasted.

So in our prayer we join Isaiah and the Jerusalem throng in pleading to be saved. Come, Lord, Jesus. Enter our hearts with your grace that we may be saved from our sins. Use our hands molded by Your grace that we may live a sanctified life to your glory and to show your love to all. Amen.