

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)
Can hostility, or enmity, or conflict ever be constructive?

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Reflections on Is 40:1-5, 9-11; 2 Pet 3:8-14; Mk 1:1-8 – Dec. 6, 2014

Today's readings raise some difficult questions. The first is, "Can hostility, or enmity, or conflict ever be constructive? Or productive? Can unleashing superior military force ever serve a worthwhile purpose?" This is a loaded question. But our scriptures never shy away from the tough ones, do they? It seems that the Bible is full of every human foible, and has its own share of ambiguities and self-contradictions.

As a conscientious objector to warfare, I will be the first to admit that my tolerance for hostilities and my enthusiasm for armed conflicts are extremely low, even when the outcome is described in glowing terms by the last army left standing.

Yet our first reading seems to frame the outcome of an ancient war between Assyria and Babylon in positive terms for the Jews—who came out on top, after all.

When the latter part of Isaiah (known as Deutero- or Second-Isaiah) was written, the majority of the Israelites who *had* lived in Judea and Jerusalem were actually living in exile and servitude in Babylon. The Jewish army of that day had been easily defeated by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, who deported the remaining Jews to Babylon in several waves during the upper 500s BC.

The exiled Israelites bided their time in Babylon for a couple of generations, and then Cyrus the Persian came on the scene with a superior army, crushing the Babylonians in 539 BC. Even more amazing: he was viewed as savior to the Israelites, because he set them free to return to their homeland in Judea.

Deutero-Isaiah saw this happy change in fortune as a sign of God's favor. He went so far as to call the pagan Cyrus "My shepherd who fulfills my every wish" and "my anointed [messiah] whose right hand I grasp" (Isa 44:28; 45:1).

This story tends to affirm the old adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Refocusing our attention on events closer to our *own* time and place (let's say in the last 500 years or so), we can find other instances of violent conflict having arguably had a good outcome? Perhaps! One could make the case that it has to do with the amazing diversity in our religious traditions!

The Protestant reformation and all that followed arose *not* out of friendly persuasion, but rather in circumstances of hostility and enmity. But without that Reformation—an often bloody struggle that lasted centuries—, we in the Beatitudes Community would not be worshiping where we are today.

Like the Israelites who benefitted from Cyrus the Persian's war with Babylon, we are benefitting from the strength of some sympathetic Protestant churches. These brave souls have *stood strong* against the hegemony of the institutional Catholic establishment, and prevailed.

Where was God in all this mess? Apparently with the underdogs, as is so often true. Might we make the case that we in the *Beatitudes* and similar (exile) communities today are the *new* underdogs? Let us hope so, and let us be strong as we pray for God's continuing favor.

There's still more resonance to the first reading, the old Deutero-Isaiah narrative. That prophet was also convinced that God would lead his chosen people home "through the desert" with a proverbial strong arm. He wrote:

Here is your God! Here comes *with power* the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm.

As Walter Brueggemann pointed out, this God, at the head of an imagined victory parade, is *macho*—clearly capable of realizing every earthly promise and vision of a Jewish prophet. But then, and very suddenly, the imagery shifts, and we see a God moving at the head of a *joyful and tender*

procession, as gentle and peaceful as a shepherd caring for the sheep. I quote:

Like a shepherd he feeds his flock;
in his arms he gathers the lambs,
carrying them in his bosom,
and leading the ewes with care.

With these two images — powerful warrior and gentle shepherd — Second Isaiah, says Brueggemann, lets God *be* all / *in* all / *for* all. This is indeed comforting. It's the calling of every messenger who would proclaim the good news: to show God's power to turn situations around, sometimes by the *un*-likeliest of means.

We have a Jewish prophet at work in today's gospel, too – John – and what a prophet he was! Remember how Jesus praised him in Matt. 11?

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.'

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

In today's reading from Mark's Gospel, the writer invokes and paraphrases not just Isaiah, but a *mélange* of *three different texts* from the Hebrew scriptures (Exodus 23:20; Malachi 3:1; and Isa 40:3) to help us better understand who John is, and to give him the prophetic credibility that Jesus saw so clearly.

John (Mark tells us) was one tough customer. He evidently ate locusts for breakfast. Remember the plagues of Egypt? Locusts were viewed as the very agents of God's punishing destruction. And here we have a Biblical upending: young John the Baptist, eating the destroyer alive and licking his chops! Mmmmm. What does that suggest about his strength?

Honey in Scripture is a symbol of peace, plenty, and preservation. He eats that, too. What a guy! What a balance! What a voice! What a clarion call he has to deliver! And he does . . .

Clearly something good is afoot in this earliest layer of Mark, the earliest Gospel that we have. The symbolism is rich, and there's more to come.

May we all have a blessed Advent! Amen!