

Brackenhurst Methodist Church 7 December 2008
Advent 2: The Word of God in the Old Testament am & pm (HC)
(God's prophets declare his salvation)

Welcome & Notices

Call to Worship:

Advent Candle

Opening Prayer

Blessed Lord,

you gave us the scriptures to point the way to salvation:

teach us to hear them, read them and study them with love and prayer

and strengthen us by their inspiration

to hold firm the hope of eternal life;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayers / offering / prayers

Scripture:

Isaiah 55:1-11

Romans 15:4-13

John 5:36-47

Message

INTRODUCTION

- Friends, Advent is a time of preparing our hearts for the birth of Christ, a time of being reminded of the incredible, amazing, awesome, life-changing presence of God in our world
 - through the Son Jesus of Nazareth
 - * It is a time of remembering the hope that we have in the presence of Jesus, and also of his return
 - * It is a time of remembering the repeated announcements and promises of what this presence accomplishes
 - * And it is a time of rejoicing in the salvation that was won for us by this same Jesus
- So as we continue our journey through this time of Advent our theme today is the Word of God in Old testament, or God's prophets declare his salvation, and the key word here is "**WORD**"

- The Word of God in the Old Testament
- The Word that was spoken that told of the one who was to come
- The Word that was the answer to the question of people's hope
- We don't always realise it, but words hold incredible power: power to create and destroy, to tear down and build up.
- The words that we speak as men and women are powerful, and can accomplish amazing things, some good, some bad
 - think of words spoken at a political rally for example
 - Or words of encouragement to a team before a game
- One of the lies that we are told as children is sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never harm you
 - I think that broken bones heal far more easily than broken spirits
 - * And many of us will be aware of the power of words to break us psychologically
- Many people struggle their whole lifetimes to deal with things that they believe because they have been told,
 - Because a word has been spoken to them
- whether by enemies, friends, or even parents
 - You're not good enough, you'll never amount to anything
 - * Individuals believe it
 - * Communities believe it
 - * Countries believe it
- I came back from America feeling very encouraged about South Africa
 - We're a much better country, I think, than we believe we are
 - * I just look at the US right now, and their situation
- Our words have power, and if our words have power, how much more power does the word of God have to bring about change and transformation?
 - And as we look today at the prophets a particular aspect of their ministry is that they were seen as guardians of the Lord Yahweh's spoken word:
- Mostly the prophetic books begin with a description of the prophet's call in words like these:
 - The word of the LORD, Yahweh, came to him; came to me
- In a time when God wasn't present, he was present through his Word, spoke through the prophets
 - And it was their responsibility to take the Word and interpret it for the people such that they understood God's plan and purpose.
 - * And the purpose of Word spoken by the prophets is sometimes described as being to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted

- I mentioned the United States earlier, and said that I didn't think they were a much better country than we are
 - But like the child whose self image has been shaped by the positive and negative words that he or she grows up
 - * They've grown up believing that they are better and can do whatever the wish
 - South Africa has grown up believing that we are hopeless and filled with problems, the pariah of the world during apartheid
- So what is the Word that needs to be spoken today to us to reassure us and comfort us in our affliction as individuals?
 - What is the Word that needs to be spoken to us as a community that has faith in itself?
 - And what is the Word that needs to be spoken to our country to give us the confidence to stand up and take its place on the world stage?
- It is the same Word that has been spoken since the beginning of time
 - And it is the same word that is lived out in the person of Jesus
 - * The Word of Life
 - * The Word of Acceptance
 - * The Word of Freedom

(1) The Word of Life

- So firstly, the Word of God in the Old Testament is always the Word of Life
 - In the beginning, says John, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (Jn 1:1)
- It is this Word, the word that was spoken into chaos, that brought about creation and life
 - Bringing life means speaking into chaos
- This is what the prophets did — in times and places when things were falling apart
 - When the kings of Israel had become corrupt,
 - when the people had become immoral,
 - when the nation had lost sight of the requirements that God laid upon them as his chosen people
- the Word of the Lord Yahweh came to the prophets and they were compelled to go into whatever situation
 - Some were able to go into the kings courts
 - others prophesied in the city to the people

- But they were compelled to go into the corrupt situation and say to the people that what they were doing is wrong and is going to bring about death
 - Instead, here is a way of living that brings life
 - If you want to experience life in it's fullness this is what you ought to do: you need to change your ways, you need to stop your deceitful behaviour
- Most often people didn't listen because they were too comfortable, instead they ridiculed and persecuted the prophets
 - Their task, in this instance, was to afflict the comfortable
- A good example of a modern day prophet is Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu: Someone who has always seen injustice and spoken out against it
 - And if you've been listening to the news this last week you will know that he said that Mugabe has to go, if necessary by military force.
 - * He speaks out against the death so that life can come
- And the Word of God in the Old Testament, and the Living Word in the person of Jesus continues to do the same
 - In every situation, in every encounter that Jesus had with people
 - * Whether it was discussions with the Pharisees, teaching his disciples or performing miracles among the crowds
 - His ministry and presence was characterised by bringing life
 - * He brought new life to the Law
 - * new life to the unwell and the dead
 - * New life to those who followed him
- The Word that needs to be spoken is the Word that brings life

(2) The Word of Acceptance

- Secondly, the Word that was spoken and needs to be spoken is the Word of acceptance
 - The word that you are good enough
 - The Word of comfort for the afflicted
 - * This is the passage that we read from the prophet Isaiah earlier
- I spoke last week about the circumstances in which this passage was written — a time when Israelites who had been in Exile had to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild their city
 - And so Isaiah says to them Come who are thirsty, come you who have no money, come and receive without cost
 - * And then you will go out with joy.
- There is no requirement placed on the people

- He doesn't say come if you have money, or come, if you are good enough, or come, if you have the right pedigree.
- No! He is speaking to people who have been exiles, and — listen to this — he is speaking to people who had a mindset that their God had abandoned them because they were not good enough
 - their exile was seen as punishment
- And now he is saying to them, to the nation of Israel, he is speaking to them the Word of acceptance
 - God loves you, God accepts you just as you are, God welcomes you back into his kingdom and if you listen to the Word of acceptance you will hear him saying
 - “I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David” (Is 55:3) and
 - “the LORD Yahweh, your God, the Holy One of Israel has endowed you with splendour” (Is 55:5)
- It was a group of slaves, slaves and refugees from Egypt, that God spoke to from the mountain
 - It was slaves to whom God said, “You shall be my people..”
 - * Out of all the peoples on the earth it was the least worthy
- Paul captures the spirit of this word as he writes to the Romans about bearing with the failing of the weak
 - And reminding them that they ought to accept one another as Christ accepted them
 - * And we read in John's gospel Jesus saying to his followers that they did not choose him, but he chose them. (Jn 15:16)
- The Word that so many people need to hear in our country, that our country needs to hear
 - Is the Word of Acceptance
 - * Whites need to hear that we are accepted and that we have a place in South Africa
 - * Blacks need to hear that they are accepted and valued and are good enough
- The Word of Acceptance

(3) The Word of Freedom

- Thirdly, the prophetic word that is spoken is the Word of Freedom
 - I think that there can be no greater feeling than that of being told “you are not guilty, and are free to go”

- About ten years ago it was my first year in ministry and was stationed in Coronationville and would travel through to Soweto for lectures and exams
 - This particular morning I had some friends in the car with me and we were rushing to get to the college to write an exam
 - * And you know what happened, don't you?
 - A traffic officer jumped out of the bushes and informed me that I had been speeding
 - * Luckily in the car with me was my friend Craig who has the gift of the gab — and is fluent in most of our official languages
 - And so he got out the car and had a conversation
 - And in short order the officer told me that I was free to go
- At one moment that sinking feeling of being pulled over; the next the relief of being set free
 - How much more for somebody who has been in prison awaiting trial for months or maybe even years: “You are free to go...”
- There are so many people today living under the judgement of unnecessary guilt
 - Guilt which has built up over the years over things done or not done and all the while telling them that they're not worthy, they're no good, they are failures
 - * All because of a little thing that has been allowed to become a big thing
- So many people have come to me over the years, with what I would consider, a minor issue
 - And they say “I did this... Do you think I will still go to heaven when I die? Do you think God can still love me?”
- Just like the Israelites in captivity, in Exile for 70 years, generations worth of guilt, of having done this stuff that has caused God to abandon them
 - * “I did this, God has abandoned me, God is punishing me.”
- If you are one of those people you need to hear that the word that is spoken, the word that prophesies and foreshadows the coming Christ, is the Word of freedom
 - That's why we can celebrate Communion this morning — because Christ dies to set us free — Christ died to set you free.
 - * I pray that you will hear that word this morning
- And I pray that if you don't need to hear that word
 - That you yourself will never, ever speak a word of guilt over somebody else's life
 - * Let us use our words to set people free
 - * to set our country free
- The Word of freedom

CONCLUSION

- Our reading this morning have been about the scriptures, and our theme has been the Word of God in the Old Testament
 - Paul writes that everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope.
 - Jesus reminds the Pharisees against diligently studying the scriptures, the Law of Moses, to find life, and yet missing the true life that Jesus offers
- The Word that is spoken, the Word that testifies about Jesus is
 - the Word of Life
 - the Word of Acceptance
 - the Word of Freedom
 - * Not the word of being bound to the law or tradition
- In our interactions, as Christians, with others, is this the Word that we bring — that of forced obedience to an ethical code, a law code
 - do we proclaim a word that seeks to hold captive
 - * a word that constrains others to our ideas of what is right and wrong
 - * And a word that brings death?
 - Or do we speak a word that brings life, acceptance and freedom?
 - * A word that is free of judgement and condemnation and guilt
 - * and instead filled with love
- If we are to share Christ with the world, especially this Christmas time, the Word needs to be born in us first
 - We need to hear the word of life afflicting us in the places where we are comfortable, showing us a better way to live
 - We need to hear the Word of acceptance being spoken to us in the places where we feel unworthy, the word of comfort in our affliction
 - And we need to hear the word of freedom, the word that sets us free to live to live as fully as Christ intended, that sets us free to love wastefully, and to be all that we can be.
 - * We need to hear those words
 - And our country, our communities, our families need to hear those words.
- This Christmas let us set the Word free, in our lives, and in the lives of others
 - to create life
 - to proclaim acceptance
 - and to set people free
- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen