



Reflecting on the Hymns in Advent

There's a Voice in the Wilderness #106

1 There's a voice in the wilderness crying,
a call from the ways untrod:
prepare in the desert a highway,
a highway for our God!
The valleys shall be exalted,
the lofty hills brought low;
make straight all the crooked places,
where the Lord our God may go!

2 O Zion, give voice to good tidings,
ascend to the heights and sing!
Proclaim to a desolate people
the coming of their King.
The works of pride all perish,
like flowers they shall decay;
the power and pomp of nations
shall pass like a dream away.

3 But your word, O God, is faithful,

your arm, O Lord, is strong;
you stand in the midst of nations,
and you will right the wrong.
You will feed your flock like a shepherd,
and fold the lambs to your breast;
in pastures of peace you'll lead them,
and give to the weary rest.

4 There's a voice in the wilderness crying,
a call from the ways untrod:
prepare in the desert a highway,
a highway for our God!
The valleys shall be exalted,
the lofty hills brought low;
make straight all the crooked places,
where the Lord our God may go!

This hymn has a connection to our part of Ontario!
The author, James Lewis Milligan was born in
Liverpool, England in 1876. His early education was
obtained at Anglican schools. Going to work in the
building trades at the age of twelve, he applied
himself so diligently to self-study that he soon began
contributing to London newspapers. In 1910 a
collection of his verse was published resulting in his
receiving the Hemans Prize for Lyrical Poetry. The
next year, with his family, he emigrated to Canada
and became a pastor on the Methodist circuit in

Hastings County, Ontario. He died in 1961.
(Hymnary.org)

This hymn is perfect for our reflection on the scripture readings for Advent 2 as it comes directly from our Old Testament reading: Isaiah 40:1-11 and it begins what is called the section of the book called Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55), the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile. The first words of this passage, that is in fact a poem, speak of comfort and this gives the name to this section of Isaiah, known as the “book of consolation.”

The passage offers a series of alternating voices: in verses 1-2 we hear the voice of God, in verses 3-5 there is the first anonymous voice, in verses 6-8 a second anonymous voice and finally in verses 9-11 we hear from the prophet himself. The prophet’s words emphasize God’s power and proclaims from the mountaintop Judah’s imminent salvation. God comes as king and shepherd, common images in the Old Testament, with the power to provide reparation and justice but this is balanced with the tenderness that comes with the tending of the sheep.

It is the second part, verses 3-5 that links this reading directly to the Gospel for today (Mark 1:1-8) “Prepare the way of the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” along with a reference to Malachi 3:1: “Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way;” and for Mark this messenger

in the wilderness is John the Baptist who is a voice announcing God’s intentions.

Questions to Ponder

Read the three passages: Isaiah 40:1-11, Malachi 3:1-5 and Mark 1:1-8.

1. Which voice in the Isaiah passage speaks to you at this time? Voice 1 (vv. 3-5) “let’s get going ... prepare the way... make the path straight ... let’s make something happen” or Voice 2 (vv.6-8) “People are flesh but God is eternal...things come and go and fade away...what can we do? It is in the hands of God.” The Prophet’s voice (vv.9-11) is a rallying cry of good news with hope and glad tidings for us all! Compare the hymn and the Isaiah passage and reflect upon how James Milligan has woven the scripture verses together so beautifully.
2. Malachi’s message sets a different tone and offers another set of “images for the day of the Lord’s coming.” What images most speak to you?
3. The first line of Mark’s Gospel links us to a revelation that comes close to the end of his Gospel and to the very foot of the cross. See chapter 15 and in particular verse 39. Mark takes up the prophets’ messages and sees in them the prophecy of the coming of Christ. Note that Mark quotes Isaiah but fails to mention Malachi – must have been an off day!