

Expanding for Extravagance: Making Room for God's Abundance

by Fr. Robert Trebbe

As I write this, Thanksgiving Day is just a little less than two weeks away. Soon thereafter, the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany will be upon us. During the time especially leading up to Christmas, we will hear in our Sunday Eucharistic Liturgies passages from the book of the prophet Isaiah which point to the coming of the Christ child (Advent); the arrival of the Christ child (Christmas); and the revealing of Jesus as the Anointed One to the nations (Epiphany). Leading up to and including Christmas, it will be difficult to avoid such well-known and loved arias and choruses from Georg Frederic Handel's, *Messiah*, who used a number of passages from Isaiah for his lyrics (e.g., "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders," quoted from Isaiah 9.6). So it is clear that prophecies in Isaiah are some of the more significant ones concerning the coming of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a season of preparation – both corporately, the Body of Christ, and individually – much as the season of Lent (albeit perhaps a little bit less penitential in nature than the Lenten season.) One of the passages that I have been drawn to during my personal time with God is Isaiah 54, which we will not hear in our Advent, Christmas, or Epiphany liturgies, but nevertheless has something to say to us about preparing ourselves. The prophet writes (verses 1- 6a),

"Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have born no child; break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; for the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman," says the LORD. "Enlarge the place of your tent; stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; lengthen your cords and strengthen your pegs. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess nations and will resettle the desolate cities. Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; and do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; but you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD OF HOSTS; for your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called God of all the earth. For the LORD has called you . . ." (NASB)

This passage in Isaiah 54 follows the well-known prophecy about the suffering servant, which points to Jesus Christ ("But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Is 53.5,6). Isaiah is writing after the time of the exile into Babylon in 586 B.C. Because many Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon, Jerusalem (the Holy City) was left pretty much desolate. He is comparing the desolate city of Jerusalem to a barren

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woman who will yet be made fruitful by God. Their tents are too small to contain God's blessings, so the prophet tells the people to get ready for this by expanding their tents to make room for the growing family that will result from God's blessings on them. They were going to need one really extra-large sized tent to accommodate the gifts of God.

Is there a lesson in this for us? Short answer – yup! God yearns to shower each of us with his blessings, his gifts of the spirit, his very Life. What have we done? We have built theological or personal dwellings for ourselves that are way too small. So when God comes to us, he finds the house we have built for ourselves: we have poured foundational habits, framed rigid attitudes, and roofed our lives with limited goals that are inadequate to contain him.

When God comes to us, he gives us life – abundantly. This continues to be what one contemporary author has called one of the great Christian surprises – not a life that is restricted by the “thou shalt nots,” but a life that is abundant, expansive and free! Free from the burden of guilt, free from the burden of sin and separation from God, a life free from pain and sorrow, a life free from rejection at the deepest levels. We can experience all of this, in this present reality and not just later when we are all worshipping before the Throne in the Temple in the New Jerusalem. But God isn't going to force his way into our lives and our hearts. We do have our part to play, our work to do, which is to enlarge the place of our tents, and stretch out the curtain of our dwellings. This is what St. Paul meant when he spoke of working out our own salvation (see Philippians 2.12). This is what the Church Fathers referred to as taking part in the process of sanctification – of co-operating with God as he works in and with our lives. The word they used was “synergy,” which means working together; working together not only with God, but we can extend that to mean working together with each other to make down here run like up there (a paraphrase from the Lord's Prayer, ‘Thy kingdom come, They will be done on earth as it is in heaven’).

May God grant you the wisdom and skill you need to expand your tent. When he comes, may he find room in your dwelling place to fill you to overflowing so that his Spirit will flow out through you into the world to bless the world. May you use these upcoming seasons to prepare for that.

And now may the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of the Father, and the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit be yours now and to the ages of ages.

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