

-Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

“How to Prepare”

1. My brother Héctor just published his first novel. It’s in Spanish, and I would translate the title as “Broken Boundaries”
 - a. It’s set in the 1960s in my hometown of Monterrey, in a neighborhood just across the river from downtown.
 - b. It’s a complicated love triangle, where the main character is a mom doing everything in her power to provide for her family, and to make sure that her oldest son could go to college.
 - c. My brother, who has an incredible memory, poured himself into writing the story.
 - d. The original idea came by chance in a conversation with a friend, and the concept kept rolling around in his mind.
 - e. Héctor made use of his memories of being a teenager in the mid 1960s in Monterrey to draw the picture of that busy city.
 - f. But he also had to do a lot of research, not only into what was going on in the city (he told me that he read endless local newspaper articles from the time), and he also had to get himself into the mind of his characters.
 - g. That’s a tough thing, I would imagine, to get into the mind of someone who is so different from you.
 - h. And in this case, Héctor was writing in the voice of Manuela, the mother, someone who only reached middle school education, and who felt cornered by life’s circumstances to push or even break social and moral boundaries.
 - i. I’m no literary critic, but I think Héctor succeeds in helping the reader get into the mind of Manuela, gets us to feel her feelings, to root for her, gets us to care about what happens to her and her family. He even gets us to wonder how we would react if we faced similar challenges. He gets us to see the world through her eyes.
2. When we read the Bible, we also, in a way, try to get into the mind of those Biblical characters and we try to see the world through their eyes.
 - a. That’s not an easy thing to do, with there being such a distance in terms of years and culture between us and those talked about in the Bible
 - b. But what makes the Bible timeless is that somehow, with the help of the Spirit, we are able to get into their minds
 - c. Get into the mind of the prophet Isaiah, and we will experience someone who is battling challenges on several fronts, and is eagerly awaiting the renewal of God’s people.
 - i. I will remind you that Isaiah was writing in a time of spiritual upheaval, of war, of violence
 - ii. And he picks a jarring image to speak of the people of God at that moment: a tree that has been chopped down violently, and yet, and yet, God lets Isaiah see that there is a new shoot coming from that stump, signaling life, signaling a refusal to be erased.

- iii. In spite of feeling like a stump and feeling all is finished, he wanted them to imagine that stump being renewed, resisting with a fragile green shoot on its side
 - iv. Isaiah's mind was holding in tension the advancing enemy army surrounding Jerusalem, and also the image of a future of peace and justice, where even the most vulnerable would be safe.
 - v. Isaiah sees a new beginning, a new beginning of peace, and is trying to get us to see it too.
 - vi. He sees that shoot to be this new ruler who is to come, to bring a completely unexpected, unbelievable future
 - vii. Isaiah saw the powerful and the weak together at peace, the lion and the lamb together in safety, the snake and the baby at ease with each other.
 - viii. Get into the mind of Isaiah, and you'll begin to believe and feel that, against all odds, God is not going to abandon us when we long for peace.
 - d. Get into the mind of John the Baptist, a much more fiery character, out in the desert by himself, and see through him the impending arrival of the Realm of God, and his urgent demand for preparation
 - i. The time is here!! Can't you see it?!
 - ii. Get right with God, people! Repent! For too long we've lost our way.
 - iii. You're either with God or you're not with God. So get with it!
 - iv. Make that desert road straight as an arrow, for God's chosen one to arrive without a detour
 - v. See the world through John's eyes, eager, frantic, feeling like we're running out to time to get things right.
 - vi. Like a farmer bringing in all the grain after the harvest, the time is now
 - vii. And hear his voice dripping with cynicism when he sees the religious types coming to him
 - 1. Are you here just to be like the cool kids? Don't be here just for show!
 - 2. And don't even try to argue you're holier than everyone else.
 - 3. God is sending us the one to make all things right. Live lives which show you are on the side of God's love, of God's peace.
 - e. John was fed up. He was ready for God to get us started on the right path.
 - f. Isaiah was resilient, ready for God's peace to blossom finally
3. This Advent, we prepare our hearts, clearing out obstacles so there is a straight road right into the center of our being, for us to see the world through the eyes of Jesus
 - a. Through the eyes of an innocent child, God with us, who represents the new beginning which brings God and humans together
 - b. Through the eyes of one will renew us with an example of peace, with the work of the Holy Spirit
 - c. Through the eyes of one who loves us and inspires people to risk it all so we may live as God would have us live
4. We prepare for Advent by seeing the arrival of God's Peace through the eyes of those who proclaimed that good, challenging news to our ancestors. We prepare by feeling the urgency to put away anything that separates us from God. We prepare by feeling the unreasonable

hope that peace is coming to a world filled with war. We prepare by feeling that God has not and will not turn God's back on us, but in fact, like a little branch breaking through an old forgotten stump, the life force of God will always break through.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of when you decided to make a life-changing way, even if that journey has had stops and restarts.
2. In Matthew 3:1-12, John the Baptist asks us to repent, to straighten out a highway in the desert for Jesus to arrive in us without detours. What's hard for us about repentance?
3. Isaiah 11:1-10 presents the hopeful image of a little branch coming from a dead stump as a sign that God is not done with us yet. Where do you feel that kind of hope in you and around you?

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