

## **Prepare the Way**

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

### *Isaiah 40:1-11*

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

### *Mark 1:1-8*

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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Harsh comfort. Rigid consolation. Grim solace. Bleak peace.

The messages of our Scripture lessons this morning seem to be an oxymoron. They seem to be offering dueling messages, yet they are united. They go together.

In this season in which we anticipate the comfort that Isaiah offers, the tenderly spoken words of forgiveness to Jerusalem, the joyful leap of the not-yet-born John in his mother

Elizabeth's womb, and the quiet acceptance of Joseph when he learns that his fiancé will bear a son conceived through the Holy Spirit, we are called to do so from a place and sense of judgement, of a world needing justice, of relationships with God and others needing reconciliation and repair. Comfort cannot be given, received, nor appreciated without first a deep, honest and genuine look at why comfort is needed, why the way of the Lord needs to be prepared and the paths made straight. Comfort can come only when we are in a place to recognize our brokenness, our own wilderness.

Isaiah offers words of a long awaited relief, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." His words are tender assurance to calm the anxious and bewildered people, to soothe them, to bring them peace. It is time, they have paid the price, paid the penalty, for the sins and errors of their ways. Yet as we hear these words it is important to see just where they are in the long, prophetic Old Testament book that is central to our Advent and Christmas story, and as these words echo out to us from eight centuries before Christ was born. These healing words begin in chapter 40 and follow 39 chapters of judgement, of the need for righteousness that has preceded this relief. God has a plan for Israel, for Jerusalem, but first the city must be punished and cleansed of evil and that will be done by exile and foreign powers. The sins of greed that the wealthy flaunted in the face of the poor, the worship of pagan idols, and the outright rejection of God's commands have come with a price. The Messiah, God's long ago promise to the heirs of David, can only be fulfilled in the aftermath of Jerusalem's punishment, harsh authority, and the destruction of her oppressors.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." These words are also from Isaiah. Comfort comes only after the people have seen the ways that they have broken their covenant with Yahweh.

A voice cries out to prepare the way for the Lord, for the Messiah. Open a straight, wide highway path. Every valley shall be lifted up, everyone who struggles in poor health or in despair, all who have felt the boot of injustice, all who confess the guilt of sin, all those who have been humbled by poverty, shall be lifted up and comforted. Every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, all who have worn jewels by oppressing others shall now wear spiritual sackcloth, all who have been tyrants will be brought down and those who have neglected the needs of others will be humbled. The crooked shall be straight and the rough places plain. Only then may the glory of the Lord be seen.

Eight centuries after these words were spoken, John the Baptist quoted them from his own wilderness. For Mark's Gospel the beginning of the good news is not in a Bethlehem stable but in the harsh, rugged wilderness where John, clothed with scratchy camel's hair tunic and a belt of animal hide around his waist, called out to everyone to repent and be baptized by water to 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' John offers no words of gentle comfort, but rather a sense of urgency. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Isaiah and John were both wilderness prophets, and not just in a geographical sense, but in a spiritual sense as well. The wilderness is where solace and relief are rare, where there is a conscious need and longing for even the most basic of things, a place where so much is laid bare and raw, a barren place of vulnerability and scarcity.

Yet it is only in the wilderness, in the hard times, that there is a need for comfort. Until that low, there is a bubble, a sense perhaps that something is amiss, something is risky, yet we are blind to it. The people of Isaiah's time knew that they were not following God's commandments, that they had lifestyles that broke the covenant with Yahweh, but life was good so there was no need to change their ways. Some of the people of John the Baptist's time found comfort in his teachings and his baptism because they had known that habits and lifestyles were wrong, and they flocked to him for the comfort of forgiveness, but this was not true for all the people.

In our own times we see this same bubble lived out.

New Orleans was known for a long time to be at risk for flooding as the levees were not fully what they needed to be for a major city six feet below sea level and completely surrounded by water. Yet the work of building more reliable levees was procrastinated and delayed. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina damaged and destroyed so much of the city and beyond. Comfort came after the wilderness of the hurricane.

The housing boom for the Great American Dream allowed people to purchase homes far beyond their ability to afford them, and the mortgage companies accepted the risky loans. Buyers and mortgage companies saw the financial danger but there was so much money to be made and homebuyers saw their dreams coming true. Until the bubble collapsed into the 2007 mortgage crisis, the benefits seemed to outweigh the risks. Comfort came after the wilderness of the recession.

The 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic left a legacy of lessons, including the knowledge that an epidemic, a pandemic, would most likely come about again. For many years our government had the National Security Council directorate at the White House charged with preparing for when, not if, another pandemic would hit the nation as they monitored disease outbreaks around the world. This council was disbanded two years ago to cut back on spending as the threat of an epidemic was dismissed, as there was a bubble of safety. How much that cutback impacted the Covid-19 response in this country we will never know, but we do know the many sad and painful limits of living through an epidemic. We now seek comfort in the midst of the wilderness of the Corona virus pandemic.

We now find comfort in the midst of the wilderness of the Corona virus pandemic. Comfort comes to us in remembering that only God is forever, that the pandemic is for now, not forever. Comfort comes to us as we prepare the way of the Lord, as we make his paths straight, as we as the body of Christ embody comfort for all of God's beloved people in these times. Comfort comes to us in the peace of Christ, the Light of the World. Amen.