

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

[2] 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.

[3] A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

[4] 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.

[5] Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

[6] 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.

[7] The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

[8] The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

[9] 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!"
[10] See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
[11] 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 (NRSV)

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

[2] As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

[3] the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,' "

[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] 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. [6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] 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. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

COMFORT IN PRISON

James Carroll in his forward to William Sloane Coffin's book, *Credo* tells a story about something that happened to him in 1972. He had been arrested along with some other demonstrators for trespassing at the U.S. Capitol. They had been part of an anti-war rally, but these were not the usual student radicals. They were ministers who were (as he put it) a relatively timid group.

James wrote that as a people reared to revere authority and obey it they were “entirely disoriented” to find themselves to be labeled lawbreakers. He was depressed and afraid. Even now when he thinks of the Dark Night of the Soul he still thinks of the chill of that steel wall against his shoulder. He thinks of that terrible feeling “a steady sinking” a stone falling in the well of his own chest.

But, in the middle of that dark night James received a word of comfort. He said that for some reason the man in the cell next to him began to sing. He sang softly at first as his “resolute baritone voice” moved into what he soon realized was Handel’s Messiah. It was the voice of William Sloane Coffin, the spokesman for the demonstration at the Capitol that day.

Carroll wrote,

“Now Coffin sang as if he were alone on the earth, and the old words rose through the dark as if Isaiah himself had returned to speak for you to God – to speak for God to you. Others soon joined their voices to Coffin’s.

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light ...”

He said that Coffin knew the words and he knew the music. Listening to him sing he believed that God will indeed reign “for ever and ever” and as he felt the music “vibrate the steel” at his shoulder, he believed in himself too ...”

EXILE

It seems to me that James Carroll’s description of that remarkable night in jail captures the essence of our message for today. In a dark time of despair and punishment, a lonely and homesick people unexpectedly heard a new song. It was the prophet Isaiah’s God given song of hope. Isaiah (40:1) wrote, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

In order to understand the power of any biblical text you have to understand the historical situation. And this is especially true of this familiar text.

The people of Israel had spent more than a night in jail. They had spent 70 years in captivity, 70 years of exile in the land of Babylon. Their land was laid waste, their leaders were dead, and their temple was destroyed. Their children were learning to speak the language of the oppressor, and the few elders left who remembered the glory of home had begun to despair.

The mood of this nation in exile is captured by Psalm 137. It reads, “By the rivers of Babylon--there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.”

Psalm 137:1 (NRSV)

The Psalm goes on to tell us that the captives refused to sing because they had no hope. They hung their harps on the willow trees. The only emotion in their hearts was anger and a desire for revenge. For 70 years the news was all bad. Why should they sing while they were in captivity?

A NEW SONG

And then they heard this new song of the prophet reverberating throughout the countryside. Be comforted, the Lord is on His way. The time of exile is over. Your sins have been forgiven. (40:1-2)

I'm sure that was a hard message for God's people to believe back then. The Babylonians seemed to hold all the cards. The Babylonians were an ancient superpower. They had the military might, and besides that, a great expanse of desert separated God's people from their homeland. Who could believe in salvation when the situation was so desperate?

In the vicious “dog eat dog” ancient world the people knew all too well that life was brief and uncertain. As Isaiah put it, “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.” (40:6-7)

Almost everyone I know who has lived a while recognizes the truth of this statement. Life is precious and very short. Even those who have lived a very long time look back at their life and marvel at how quickly it has gone. In the light of our mortality and weakness, many things look impossible.

But, the prophet declared, “I speak for the God who can do impossible things. You may live for just a brief time, but the word of the Lord lives forever.” (40:8)

The proof of the prophet’s words was in the pudding. God did what must have seemed like the impossible for his captive people.

The Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and the Persian leader, Cyrus allowed God’s people to return home in order to rebuild their lives. More than that, Cyrus even gave them aid in making the journey back home. It was as if God Himself was rolling out the red carpet for his return ...leveling the mountains and filling in the valleys so God’s people could make it back home.

There was a kind of fulfillment of prophecy in that restoration to their homeland, but God’s people believed that this salvation was about more than just deliverance from their enemies at this time and place...as great as that salvation was.

This story of salvation became a kind of paradigm, an example of how God would work in the future as well. Into situations of despair and captivity, the God of Israel would bring a word of hope and deliverance. The word of the Lord does indeed last forever and so does his comfort that God brings.

A PROPHET TO EXILES

I am acutely aware each year at this time that I too am a prophet to those in exile.

Some of you here this very day long for home. And yet you know because of circumstances that you will not be able to ever go home again, at least not to the home that you once knew.

Some of you are acutely aware of life's brevity. Some of you face serious illness. Some of you struggle with guilt. Some of you are so discouraged that it is even difficult to sing the joyous songs of salvation that are so much a part of this season.

Many of us reside by the waters of Babylon, overcome by grief over what used to be.

In the darkest time of the year, I invite you to look for the light and salvation that comes through the darkness in the desert. In a time filled with noise and bluster I invite you to listen for a word of comfort that comes through the still, small voice of a baby born to Mary.

The words are so familiar, and yet somehow their power is felt afresh each year. We long for comfort, and in the silence of our jail cell we hear the soft voice of God's messenger bringing a word of comfort. The mighty God who created heaven and earth desires our salvation.

The mighty God is not the One we expected. The greatest glory of God is not seen in blinding light and overwhelming power. Instead, according to Isaiah (40:11) God is a shepherd who feeds his flock. He is a shepherd who gathers the lambs in his arms. He gently leads the mother sheep.

This is a beautiful picture of God's compassion that we find many times in the Bible. Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd, and his disciples were challenged to be good shepherds, leading God's people in the right direction and giving them something to eat. Three times the risen Jesus told Peter to show his love by feeding his sheep. (John 21:17)

I believe that God still calls his disciples to bring a word of comfort and hope to lost sheep. God still calls us to show our love by feeding his sheep.

It's interesting to note that the "you" in "comfort you my people" is plural. (40:1) In other words God is saying to the prophet that all of God's people are responsible for passing on the message of salvation. As we might put it in the South, "God says, Y'all comfort my people!"

Everyone who knows the good news of God's impending salvation is encouraged to climb the high mountain and lift up their voice. God wants everyone to hear the word of salvation and be encouraged by the news. God is on the way and will bring his people home. (40:9)

Do you remember that Christmas carol, "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and every where?" That's a joyous statement of what the prophet is getting at in this passage. And indeed, the prophet's word of hope becomes, in the providential grace of God, an even greater song of hope.

THE PREPARATION OF JOHN

Many years later a man named John began to preach in the wilderness. It was a message of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord. Did you notice the Old Testament quote in our second lesson from Mark (1:2-3)? It's from the prophet Isaiah.

The coming of John the Baptist was seen as a fulfillment of prophecy. The salvation that came to God's people in exile long ago is now coming to the whole world. John was preparing the way for the coming of God's Son, Jesus. Isaiah (9:2) put it this way, "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

So, what is this great light that comes? If God has charged us to feed his sheep, what's on the menu for Christmas this year and every year? How does God call us to prepare the way for Jesus?

Preparation for the coming of Christ always begins with repentance. The way to the manger always leads through the desert where we hear John the Baptist preach his fiery message of repentance.

We come to the desert each year because the prophet tells us that this is where salvation is to be found. We begin in the desert, a desert filled with the mountains of our unfulfilled dreams and the valleys of our broken promises. The desert is a rugged landscape, a place we would rather not visit. But, it is in the desert that we find the beginning of salvation.

What did the prophet say? In the wilderness a highway would be prepared for the coming of the Lord. The valleys would be raised up and the mountains would be lopped off. John teaches us that we prepare the way by being honest with ourselves, with each other and most of all with God.

I heard a quote this past week, a parody of what the Bible says. Someone wrote, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you mad!” I think that’s how we feel when we hear the truth about ourselves. It makes us mad. We would rather not visit John in the wilderness. The work of repentance is just too hard for us.

And yet, we dare to make that journey because we know that the same God who calls us to repent is the God who tells us “your sins are forgiven.” That was the word of comfort that the prophet Isaiah proclaimed. The penalty for sin had been paid. They had been in exile long enough.

For us those words have an even greater meaning. We know that our sins were crucified on the cross of Calvary. We know the greater message of the One who has baptized us not only with the waters of repentance but also the power of the Holy Spirit. (Mark 1:8)

COMFORT FOOD

People these days sometimes talk about comfort food. By that, they mean plain delicious food that “mama” used to make. It makes us feel better

because it reminds us of home. For me, meat loaf is comfort food or perhaps a big bowl of navy beans with cornbread.

We can look at today's lesson as a plate full of comfort food. But the menu for this Christmas does not include turkey or ham. It is a dish of "body broken and blood shed". It is communion, and it is a meal filled with a whopping helping of something called grace.

In the wilderness of our failures and broken dreams, in that place where the cold prison walls close in on our very soul, we hear the message once again.

"Comfort my people. I will say it again says the Lord. Comfort my people. Tell them that they don't have to stay in the wilderness any longer. Their sins have been forgiven. They now have a road out of the wilderness."

In a Hagar the Horrible cartoon, Hagar is addressed by a Monk. In the first frame, the monk with a Bible tucked under his arm and an expression of peace on his face, says to Hagar, "Remember, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

In the next frame, we see the monk disappearing over the horizon and we see Hagar saying, "But, I enjoy cursing the darkness!"

The only thing that will keep us in the wilderness is our own desire to stay where we are, our own perverse joy in cursing the darkness.

But, the coming of God's Son is not about darkness. It is about light. It is about learning a new way that begins with repentance and ends with a highway that takes us out of the wilderness.

MODERN DAY JOHN

In a sermon, Donna Ross imagines what might happen if John the Baptist visited a modern-day shopping mall. She describes the scene this way,

“Now imagine this; in comes John, right into the mall. It’s deep winter, but he’s wearing sandals on his bare feet, and yes, he’s wearing his camel’s hair coat, tied with a leather girdle.

He strides through the double doors of the mall and comes out into the open space near the fountain, and he’s crying out, ‘Repent!’

Unreal!

What’s this awful man got to do with Christmas? Get him out of here, so we can get our shopping done.

But, wait, imagine this:

John is a powerful preacher and the adults cease their frantic shopping and start to gather round him.

The teens stop their wandering to laugh, but then they find themselves listening.

The children hear him and leave Santa’s lap, tugging on their parents’ coats and asking questions,

‘What’s he doing here? What’s he saying? Why is he here?’

He continues to cry out,

‘Repent! Turn around!

Change your lives!’

And John is such a powerful preacher that the lights, the carols, the shopping, even Santa’s line are all forgotten, and the people begin to ask,

‘What shall we do?’

And John says,

‘Repent and be baptized.’

Then he begins to baptize them, right in the beautiful mall fountain.”
Now that’s a Christmas TV special I would really like to see!

Every year we hear the same phrase,
“Let’s put Christ back in Christmas.”

I would suggest that we first put John back into Christmas.

If you want to prepare for Christmas this year, you have to stay away from
the shopping malls.

If you want to prepare for Christmas this year you have to get your nose out
of the Christmas cards.

If you want to prepare for Christmas this year you have to leave all those
things that beg for your attention and head for the wilderness.

And in the wilderness, the wilderness of your broken dreams, it is possible to
be filled once again by the Christ-child’s grace.

It is never an easy thing to do.
Old habits die hard.

But, we cannot celebrate the coming of life and hope by filling our lives with
a solid diet of the trivial.

Let us make sure that in our Advent journey we spend at least some time with
the man who calls us to come home through the wilderness, the wilderness of
repentance.

Preparing in this way can remake the landscape of your heart and bring you
once and for all to your true home, your true self.

God says, “Y’all comfort my people with the good news of repentance.”

Let's do just that.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN