

2nd Sunday of Advent (Year B)

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 for ever.

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.'

I've always found it a bit ironic that each year we begin anticipating the birth of the beautiful baby Jesus in a picturesque manger by telling the story of a wild, hairy man who eats bugs and dunks people in a river. It seems as though in order to get to "Silent Night" we have to go through loud and bizarre daytime televangelist. You see, we often want to hurry up and get to Christmas Eve where we can sing "Away in a Manger" by candlelight but the truth is that this hairy, loud, prophetic baptizer named John stands in our way.

Perhaps you and I can sneak around him, you know, on the opposite shore. Maybe we can tip-toe our way past him without him knowing. But alas, his prophetic gaze is too keen and we have been spotted by means of the revised common lectionary. And so, you and I will spend a few minutes listening to this John the Baptist fellow in the opening pages of Mark's gospel.

The beginning of Mark's gospel describes John the Baptist by framing him within the context of a prophecy made many years prior in the book of Isaiah. The words of this prophecy came to a people who were enduring horrific circumstances due to their captivity by the Babylonians. Amid their nightmare came a prophet, who we refer to as Isaiah, who gave words of comfort to a people in need of some hope and peace. "'Comfort, comfort my people' says your God" the prophet relays. "A voice will soon cry out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord who will come in might" the prophet says.

Mark, in the opening verses of his gospel, cleverly invites us to look back at a promise that was made to the people of God in the time of their distress. Furthermore, this text from Isaiah not only speaks of the comfort that God will bring to God's people but it also maintains the constancy of God's presence in the world. Essentially, Mark is telling his readers that John the Baptist is pointing us to a plot point that has been a long time in the making.

Therefore, today's passage from Mark uses John the Baptist to point us to Christ by looking backward. It is almost as if the gospel writer is telling us that the best way to bring the coming Christ into focus is by seeing him through the lens of that which God has already promised. He invites us to prepare for what is to come by appreciating its continuity with what already has been.

But John the Baptist does not end his visceral cry by directing us to God's past actions alone; rather, he simultaneously directs us to our own past actions. Though he begins his message with "prepare the way of the Lord," he continues to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is almost as if John the Baptist is telling us that the best way to prepare for Christ's coming is to look inwardly and acknowledge the many reasons that we so desperately need him in the first place.

But that can be a scary thing. I mean, isn't it ironic that on the very Sunday that you and I light the candle for peace, John the Baptist is crying out in the wilderness for us to repent our sins. Doesn't sound very peaceful to me! But the tricky truth of Advent is that Christ cannot be fully appreciated and fully received until we first acknowledge the brokenness inside of ourselves that gives God cause to come to us in the flesh. We have to be honest with ourselves. But if you're anything like me, this does not come as naturally as we would like it to. Perhaps that is why each and every Advent we are given four weeks to heed the Baptist's cry to look inward and come to terms with the reality of our desperate need of salvation.

And so, as we continue preparing for Christ in this Advent wilderness, may we heed the words of John the Baptist and be honest with ourselves and each other. There is much work to do in the waiting. As we spend time in prayer and petition, may we be reminded that the God to whom we are being honest about our brokenness is the very God who promised comfort to the people of Israel in the Babylonian

captivity. May we remember that the God that John the Baptist is pointing us to is none other than the God who has decisively come into the reality of our lives to be with us in a beautifully physical and intimate way. John the Baptist is not threatening us with hellfire and brimstone, rather he is steering us into a stance of openness to receive the coming blessing of Jesus Christ who will come to us in the flesh.

The reason we are pointed forward to the coming of Christ by looking backward is that we need constant reminding that the God who is coming to us is the God who never really left us in the first place. Rather, the God who time and time and time and time and time again refuses to give up on his beloved children has decided to come to us as the enfleshed reality of this never-ending story of salvation.

It might just be that John the Baptist is calling us to look back and hear the old story of salvation because, in a few weeks, you and I will see it with our own eyes. Amen.