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Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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***Isaiah 40:1-11***

***Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. 3A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=isaiah+40%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18424a)***]; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=isaiah+40%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18424b)***]
4Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”***

***6A voice says, “Cry out.”
    And I said, “What shall I cry?”***

***“All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. 7The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. 8The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever******.” 9You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem,[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=isaiah+40%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18430c)***] lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” 10See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.***

***Mark 1:1-8***

***The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+1%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24217a)***] the Son of God,[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+1%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24217b)***] 2as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:***

***“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
    who will prepare your way”[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+1%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24218c)***]—
3“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
    make straight paths for him.’”[***[***d***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+1%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24219d)***]***

***4And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7******And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8I baptize you with[***[***e***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+1%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24224e)***] water, but he will baptize you with[***[***f***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+1%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-24224f)***] the Holy Spirit.”***

***9At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”***

We had a really nice bible study on Tuesday, our first of three for the Advent bible study this year. We are using a booklet called “Go Tell,” referring to the telling of the Christian story over the centuries. When something good is in your life, you want to share it – share the experience, share the insight, share the impact of that good thing. The word “gospel” literally means good news. When you tell someone about your faith, what good news do you share with them? Is it the fact that God is love? Or maybe it’s that God has promised a peace unlike any the world can understand. Maybe for you, the good news is that Christ was born for us as a great gift of God’s grace and we therefore live a life of gratefulness. For some, the good news is the certainty that in God’s time all that is wrong with the world will be put right. The title of the first class was “Tell the Right Story.” That doesn’t mean that there is a *wrong* story, but rather it means that the story you tell has to be *your own* story. In other words, if you had to boil down the impact of your faith on your life into one foundational biblical message, it would be different than that of someone else. Telling the right story, means that when you share the good news, you are sharing the part of your faith *that means the most to you*, not someone else’s good news. Once you know what the central message of faith is that has touched you in the most meaningful way, you have a better understanding of what motivates you, and what keeps you grounded, what brings you comfort, what gives you strength.

There are many ways that people have been telling about the work of God in their lives, such as through poetry or songs, like the psalms; or through messages like the prophets like Isaiah. Isaiah was a major prophet. The biblical book of Isaiah is actually two collections of words of Isaiah. This morning’s text from Isaiah 40 is the beginning of what’s called Second Isaiah – consisting of Isaiah 40-55. Said to be written by a different author, the author of Second Isaiah changes the narrative surrounding a conflict in Babylon about 600 years before Christ. Whereas the earlier narrative about that conflict was about blaming the people of Babylon for the destruction and deportation and occupation of their land, the narrative of Second Isaiah is different. “He puts aside blaming and accusing speech, bursting out, instead, in lyric poetry of comfort, hope, and joy.” Last week in my absence Penny Nixon spoke so beautifully about how hope can still exist even within an apocalyptic vision of the future, because she imagines hope as – not a promise of a magical fix from an outside invisible source void of our own work – but hope as engagement. Hope comes as we remember the promises we repeat each time we celebrate communion – “Christ Has Died. Christ Has Risen. Christ Will Come Again.” Remembering that Christ will come again is hope. And, hope is loving the world. Second Isaiah provides the same encouragement, bursting out in poetry of comfort. Commentator Kathleen O’Connor writes, “Disasters make people numb, afraid and hopeless. They undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure.” To this kind of a world she says, this text provides “terra firma for a fearful people, not in the destroyed temple, or the collapsed monarchy, or the broken covenant of the past, but in God’s never-failing word. At a time when other tangible and intangible ways of relating to God have collapsed, the prophetic word is their anchor.”1

Isaiah’s prophetic word of comfort read this morning, is good news for us during this advent, this year, in this place. And if you’re going to tell the story, if this comfort is the good news you’re going to tell, go big or go home! Don’t be shy! In our Isaiah text a voice says, “What shall I cry?” Isaiah says, ***9You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem,[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=isaiah+40%3A1-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18430c)***] lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”***

Isaiah continues this comfort promising that there will be someone sent to prepare the way for when the Lord is coming. Someone from the wilderness will prepare this way, to make it easier for the Lord to come – making rough places plain, clearing a straight path even through the desert. This prophetic voice is the good news that is continued in the gospel reading for today, promising that John the Baptist, is that very one. He is the one coming ahead of the Lord. John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth who was approached by an angel just like Mary the mother of Jesus was approached by an angel. Elizabeth’s son John grew up and lived in the wilderness so that he could be the answer to the prophet Isaiah’s voice.

The biblical choices from Sunday to Sunday during Advent are not in chronological order. The texts are chosen to heighten our experience of waiting. Before we tell the good news that Christ was born, we re-visit the scenes that help us experience the anticipation of the time. By the time Mark wrote his gospel the events had already happened. The purpose of Mark was to show wherever he could, how everything about Jesus, even before his birth, was a fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. Before Jesus came John the Baptist.

And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptist had followers too. People were being baptized by John the Baptist, much like the church tries to copy now, with water. Some churches have full dunking spaces in the church; some churches will take people out to a lake. Some churches sprinkle a little handful of water on top of someone’s head. All of what we do now, is because Jesus too was baptized with water. Although, never have I ever, heard a voice from heaven say anything, after a baptism. I wish!

When we tell the story of our faith in our lives, we do so in many ways. Institutionally we ritualize events, much like baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We commemorate things by building the church year around the highlights and the cycle of the Christian faith story. We repeat and repeat and repeat, knowing that this helps us to remember and helps us to welcome again and again, the work of the holy spirit into our understanding of the intersection of our lives and our faith calling. We tell the story of our faith with our actions, trying to stay true to the values that we carry.

As we wait this Advent season, what good news will sustain us? Today as we look for hope, and particularly today for a radical peace that only God can bring, perhaps we can start with the comfort that Isaiah has promised, knowing that the Messiah is coming soon.

Amen.

1Kathleen O’Connor, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, p.27-31.