

Isaiah 40:1-11 “Comfort and Joy”

December 6, 2020

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

Isaiah 40:1-11

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

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."

My favorite Christmas letter I've ever received was from a friend who is a commercial pilot. It began something like this:

"Dear friends. This has been quite a year. I lost most of my savings in a bad investment, had a vasectomy, and made my first ever crash-landing (a proud moment which you may have heard about on the news). But enough about me!"

My favorite *fictional* Christmas letter is from an episode of the TV show "The Simpsons," which shows Marge, the Mom, writing the following:

"Dear friends of the Simpson family—It's been quite a year!...Maggie is walking by herself, Lisa got straight A's, and Bart... well, we love Bart."

Christmas letters, in good years, can be great. You get to catch up on all the goings-on of your far-flung friends and relatives. But in bad years, you can't help but notice that most Christmas letters are nothing like the one from my pilot friend, or the one from Marge Simpson. Most Christmas letters are filled with tidings of world travel and professional triumph and prize-winning children. So if you are on the verge of bankruptcy, your career is down the tubes, your marriage is dissolving, or your kid is in rehab, reading these letters can be like taking a knife to the gut.

And having to try and write one is even worse.

I once spoke to a man who had three sons—three!—in prison. It was around this time of year, so I said, “Wow, that must make writing those Christmas letters really hard!” But he just shrugged and said, “Oh, we lie.”

We lie. That’s the secret of most Christmas letters. This compulsion to present a fantasy life for a magical season.

It’s no wonder we feel a need for a blue Christmas or a Longest Night service—a special service to acknowledge the particular pain so many people feel during the relentless onslaught of Christmas cheer.

The cultural phenomenon of Christmas ignores much of what was frightening and painful about that first Christmas, and it ignores Advent altogether—that tension between what we hope for, and what is. And truth be told, we are Advent people: people who live in a world that has pain and joy all mixed up together. A world in which the reign of God has come among us, and yet is also not completely fulfilled. This—not the perfect Christmas card world—is the world to which Jesus came. The world to which Jesus keeps coming, again and again if our eyes are open to see him.

Listen to the voice of Isaiah:

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,

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!"

Isaiah is speaking to a people in exile. Years earlier they had been ripped from their homeland and marched off to Babylon. This trouble was brought on them by their own behavior—or at least, by the behavior of their leaders, but, as in any community or any family, when one person goes off-the-rails, we all suffer.

So now, a generation later, they were still pine for Jerusalem, even as the memories of their homeland fade along with their hopes. Here, though, Isaiah speaks to them on God's behalf: God is coming to them, and nothing will get in God's way. "A voice cries out: Prepare a way in the wilderness—level the mountains, straighten the paths!"

We think of Advent as a time to get ourselves ready, but in this passage, the voice demanding preparation seems to be addressing not the people, but the elements themselves. Like God's voice in Genesis crying out to the dark chaos, "Let there be light," this voice cries out to the mountains and the valleys, and to the vast wilderness that separates the people from the land they love, commanding: "Clear the way for God," because God is coming to lead the people back home, and nothing is going to get in God's way.

You may notice that in our Gospel passage, Mark introduces John the Baptist by quoting Isaiah:

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 God's paths straight," "

Though Mark's people weren't in exile, they might as well have been. They were in their own land, but their land has been ripped from them by Rome. Their own religious leaders were colluding with the occupiers. The economic scales were tipped against them to drag the poor more deeply into debt, and it seemed that there was no justice to be had, except the justice you could pay for. They, too, desperately needed change—in their world, in their lives, and so, says Mark:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And the people crowded to him for this baptism, which was to change their hearts, their minds, the direction of their lives.

Now, as we all know, change is hard. So why were people so eager to embrace this change that John called for? Because he didn't couch it as a threat to avoid something bad; instead, it was an invitation to welcome something good—forgiveness, and the saving power of God.

Comfort, O comfort my people. Your God is coming to you. Turn your lives around, so you can see God's reign.

We, too, need the comfort of God—comfort that comes from the promise that change is coming. Because, we, too, are caught—

Between a pandemic that continues to surge, and our need to earn a living and have a life;

Between our nation's the rhetoric of equality and the reality of racial and economic injustice;

Between faith in God and our fear for the future;

Between who we want to be, and how we really live. We are caught. And we can't see our way clear to the other side.

John couched his call to repentance in the language of baptism, so today, I'm preaching beside the font, remembering the link between baptism and new life.

Baptism is new life, but it isn't a magical life. It doesn't solve all of our problems or make confusion go away. The baptized life is an Advent life--still filled with struggles and stumbles, but also with the promise that repentance—real change-- is always available to us.

But that's not the only good news of baptism. The even better news is that God doesn't wait for us to get our acts together. God is already coming to us. Even as we struggle to make the changes that our lives need, God is already knocking down every obstacle to reach us. As the old Motown hit said, "ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough" to keep God away.

And that's true for you, too, in your life—however unshiny and imperfect your life may be. After all, God doesn't come to us because we're ready—God comes to us because we're needy. And oh, are we ever needy!

Comfort, O comfort my people. I will lead you like a shepherd, I will gather you tenderly in my arms. Comfort, comfort.

Who doesn't need to hear that?

So if you haven't already sent out your Christmas letters, consider doing something different this year. Consider writing an Advent letter, instead. A letter that drops the shiny façade to show the reality of your life, a life in which there is joy—of course!—but joy that is mixed up with all the messiness, all the brokenness that is part of *every* life.

Write a letter like that, and your friends will thank you.

Write an Advent letter that acknowledges the vast wilderness that stands between where we are, and where we long to be. And in your letter, make sure to mention what it is we are waiting for: the God who is surely coming, not with judgment for who we've failed to be, but with tenderness for who we truly are: God's own people, God's own flock, for whom God's heart aches.

These are our tidings of comfort and joy: that God knocks down every obstacle and comes to us where we are, here in our wilderness, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a world made new.