

Sermon for Dec. 6, 2020, Second Sunday in Advent

First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11 Comfort for God's People

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries: "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.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all flesh shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass,

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades

when the breath of the Lord blows on it;

surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

but the word of our God will stand forever.

Go on up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good news;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good news;

lift it up, fear not;

say to the cities of Judah,

"Behold your God!"

Behold, the Lord God comes with might

and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms;

he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Gospel: Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,

who will prepare your way,

the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’”

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

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¹Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”

You may wonder: Double WHAT? Double trouble? Or double blessing? Speak to the heart of her... because she suffered a long war, a long exile, a long campaign with a hard enemy. She took a beating... a severe one... excessive... but (ultimately) it was the Lord's punishment upon her. She has a complaint... maybe... why should she expect that it would be easy? Why was she put through the ringer?

Who is SHE, by the way? “Jerusalem” the holy city. The kingdom of heaven... God's bride but also God's people. I have a hard time not seeing this as a picture of an

abusive husband. "Yes, I beat you severely... but I'm really, sorry... here let me comfort you with many comforts..." I can't help but think this way because the world we live in has managed to get into my head and wants me to see the word of God through the distorted lenses of abusing human relationships. I need to reframe and LISTEN to WHAT God is saying here... not the world's distortions. The prophet is telling us to cry to her.... NOT shout... because the text takes pains to say these words are to be spoken tenderly, as by a lover. But, cut through the NOISE and the disorientating effects of her pain... SPEAK to her HEART with comforting words.... Words of truth and words of love.

I think of the scene from the movie the Kingdom of Heaven: Balien's father is wounded in a battle, shot in the ribs with an arrow. The Hospitaller knight removes the arrowhead, but the reality of the wound is that it is BAD... "If the ribs are **broken**, the marrow will enter the blood and **you** will develop fever and die, or **a cyst will form** and **you will live**. Either way, you are in the hands of God."

The words of the prophet are similar in nature. The reality is Jerusalem, God's people, have had a time of it. A hard time. With a hard enemy. God is NOT their enemy. And while the Lord allowed the battle, the battle was with SIN. God was not being abusive to her. He was being a surgeon. A teacher, a prophet, a priest and king... She was up against something big. A great and powerful enemy. She needed perhaps to know the power that held her in its grip.

She was NOT being punished disproportionately. If you want to discover who it was that was punished disproportionately you merely need to look to Jesus. He took the sins of the world away... THIS is the COMFORT the prophet is to proclaim... SHE will never have to fight this war again... the punishment for sin is OVER. Rather than paralleling this trial to abuse, perhaps it's more like childbirth and the conclusion of difficult pregnancy... the words are remarkably similar in their description... her LABOR is ended. And the child is the first born of the dead... the MORTAL, who will end death. Our Savior.

On this second Sunday in Advent that is our proclamation.... COMFORT and JOY is the seasonal language... and the JOY is in the response to the great comfort we receive... MAKE WAY...Clear a path for the Savior.

Do this work in response.... As individuals, certainly, and I invite you to reason out in your own life and your own household how you might clear the way... But I also invite US... as His people, His congregation, to be about the business of clearing the way.

In what areas do we need to cut things DOWN?

In what areas do we need to build low spots UP?

What areas are out of balance and need to be made straight?

What are the rough spots that need smoothing?

That we may see the GLORY of the LORD.