

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Sermon 12.6.20

**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 forever. 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." (440)

Jesus enters the scene of a sudden—just not yet for us this morning.

According to Mark, Jesus arrives on the scene already grown, ready to move. Unlike in Matthew, where there's a long prelude (much about Jesus' lineage and eventually stories of Jesus' nativity); unlike in Luke, where there's also a long prelude (much about Jesus' lineage, though a little different than Matthew's version, and eventually stories of Jesus' nativity and his youth); unlike in John, where the reality and activity of Christ come in the beginning, when God began to create, and where Jesus is understood as the manifestation of that eternal, abiding Christ: in Mark,

Jesus enters the scene of a sudden, already born, already grown, ready to move, ready to work and have his effect.

And he does indeed have his effect. Setting the unholy to flight, setting darkness to light, Jesus is presence the very presence of which changes everything within its field. Jesus is massive in this gospel, the setting of whose mass into the web of existence alters the shape of the web of existence.

Just not yet, for us, this morning.

Glory: he is glory, which means weight or substance. Something is glorious if it has weight, substance. I bet you didn't know that. I know I didn't know that. I'd always thought of glory as something ineffable, immaterial. Often imagined in physical terms as light, glory, I always thought, had something to do with light.

Turns out light is itself not entirely immaterial. As it happens, light is somehow substantive, though we're not sure how, though which we know because it's been proven that light is subject to gravity, which is to say light has gravitational pull, which is to say on a physical level light is attractive. It attracts the way mass does, so it might have mass...?

Jesus arrives like light, having immediate effect, setting darkness to flight while attracting all other things.

Just not yet, for us, this morning.

Meanwhile, the world to which Jesus was first sent, according to Mark, was as if an occupied territory—occupied by things other than God and glory and light, occupied by an enemy army of unholiness, oppression and menace and illness and death.

I've been feeling that lately, from time to time—like an occupying force is at work in our lives. This virus: watching it come at us, though not being able to see it. Numbers are way up.

Mark, it's worth remembering, was writing at a time of intensification, the occupation of Jerusalem by Rome. Soldiers on every street corner, the Temple now destroyed or in the process of being destroyed, the presence of Rome was like the presence of something dark to which Christ would be as light setting such darkness to flight.

True, at the time of Jesus' life, fifty years earlier than Mark's writing, things weren't quite so intense. But imperial occupation was endemic in Judea. There was always some menacing

presence to hope would be set to flight. The people had often hoped for a good trouncing. But it would be more than enough simply if imperial forces were to *go away*.

For Isaiah, it was Babylon. But occupation then had turned to destruction, Babylonian soldiers no longer occupying the land but instead destroying the land, the city, the Temple, and forcing the people into exile, into Babylon.

This was an event that amounted to something even worse, though, than deportation and dispossession. This was an undoing. The people's move across the wilderness from Judea in the west to Babylon in the east was as their undoing—for it had been the move out of Ur in the east to Judea in the west that was their making. When Abraham left Ur and traveled where he did, the people became a people, became the found and chosen people.

To go back, then, even these centuries, millennia later: no! There was an existential threat buried in this event even more profound than social trauma. There was annihilation, being utterly forgotten as if never to have existed.

That sweater that you painstakingly knitted, pull that one loose thread, and you've got a pile yarn.

I remember when Tobias was first born, looking at the knot at his navel. It was one of those post-partum obsessions of mine, when you're full of the urge to keep this tiny one alive, whatever it takes, on full alert all the time. What would happen, I would wonder, if that knot came undone? Would he cease to be? I knew that's not how it works, but I was madly worried about the condition of that knot, as if my baby's being came down to that knot.

So, this path that the people might somehow prepare, this highway that they might somehow make straight though in the wilderness: this was as if to assure them they would not be forgotten, they would not be unfound. Though they were in a foreign land, their Lord would find them and come to them, right? Though they were where they'd been before they had been, their Lord would return even here and give them new birth, right?

Do you remember as a kid being somewhere new for Christmas and wondering whether Santa would find you here?

So, make a path, that you shall be found. Prepare a way (the people should do) that the Lord would know them even amidst the strange practices of Babylon, would recognize them even though a scattered presence of the people there. This they should do, lift up the low places and

flatten the high, smooth out the rough places and make plain the uneven—that the Lord’s presence and promise would be revealed even though the people had passed away from their land and would pass away from the known world, like grass, like grass, brown then green then brown again.

They would be found. The Lord would arrive among them, and always remember them, they’re being assured. The Lord might even give Babylon a good trouncing. You never know. Even mighty empires come to an end. The word of the Lord though—truth, life, creative power? That stands forever.

Comfort. O, comfort.

As for why Mark associated John with these long-ago prophesied words of preparation, I wish I knew. For his promising this latest advent of the Lord, some 500 years later than when Isaiah spoke, I wish I understood why he recalled that long ago need for the people to prepare a way, and that the way should be straight.

I asked myself this many times this past week, as I stepped up my preparations for Christmas. Putting up tree, decorating it with tiny lights and funny figurines, I held in mind the question, what does this have to do with that for which I’m waiting—a savior from all the complication and conflict and menace of the world? What do these preparations have to do with that for which I’m told I should prepare (for he is coming—this one whose authority will bring clarity, justice, peace)?

Don’t get me wrong. I love the Christmas season, in all its tinsel cheerfulness. I love the Muppets singing “The Twelve Days of Christmas” as much as I love Handel’s oratorios, and I love Linus’ version of the gospel nativity on the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special* almost as much as I love hearing it in church. I’m no snob, and I’m no prisoner of piety. But I have little confidence that any of my so-called Christmas preparations have anything to do with what John was thought to have me prepare for, would have us prepare for.

Worse, though, I don’t even get the why and wherefore of his urging preparedness, especially when it comes to this gospel narrative. I don’t know what sort of path he had in mind for the people to make now, at the time of his writing, as they were not away from their homeland. They’d have been easily found by their Lord who commanded them to live in this land. They’d have therefore needed no actual path for the success of the event they hoped for (desperately hoped for!)—their Lord’s return to them.

Thinking more metaphorically, now, I don't know what sort of preparation Mark's John had in mind, especially since the Jesus we meet in Mark is one for whom you can't really prepare. He arrives of a sudden, and he changes everything by his mere presence. How do you get ready for that?

For this sort of one, it seems to me, all you can do is wait. Brace yourself, maybe. But better yet, wait.

Just wait.

On an unexpected trip to Florida, the Atlantic coast a few years ago, I took an afternoon to go to the beach. There was a storm somewhere out to sea and the waves were wild, wilder than I realized when I first decided to go in and play. The first couple hits were fun, but then I realized this was something more severe than I wanted. But I couldn't get out easily before the next wave was to come. So, I decided to take it, to brace myself, and try to duck under, but it got me anyway, turned in every direction under water, with sand and small rocks hitting my face, in my mouth, up my nose. "This isn't a joke, Liz," I told myself, with a moment of even mortal fear. "The ocean has no care for you."

At each of my births, when those contractions came rolling down, the next one about to begin, terror attended. There was no getting out of this now.

Get ready. Get ready! (There's no way you can be ready.)

Just wait.

Build a highway for your God, if you must.

Put up a tree in your living room if you like and it cheers you during this dark season as mine does me.

But then, sit quietly by it. Find a chair and wait.

Just wait.

Do you know what that feels like? The powerlessness? The dependence upon something else happening that has little to do with your agency, your proven ability to make things happen?

Why do we call them waiters, waitresses, those who serve you in restaurants? I've never had a busier, more doing-of-things job than being a waitress. That is *not* waiting. That's doing. Amazing that we get that wrong.

Just wait.

I imagine this isn't so helpful to hear.

It certainly doesn't feel urgent to preach, or that effective a thing to preach. But who knows? The Holy Spirit has its way with the preached word.

Just wait.

I can tell you this: often my waiting for something to occur does seem to meet with an occurrence, and often my waiting for Christ to occur does seem to meet with Christ's occurrence. A dispelling of despair, a dissipating of bitterness, a driving away of indecision or confusion or defeat: wait for it.

It's coming.

And if that, then maybe this, too: a dispelling of all despair, a dissipating of all bitterness, a driving away all confusion or conflict or destruction, a filling instead with grace and presence and magnanimity and truth.

Wait for it. Just, wait.

It might be coming.

Thanks be to God.