

“The Beginning of the Good News”

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December 10, 2017

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.”

“Comfort my people.” Then, to make sure the listener got it, “Comfort them. Speak tenderly to

them.”

Jerusalem’s population is reeling as they try to make sense out of what is now their life. The exile has ended. Those taken to Babylon have returned home. But home is home no longer. There is no comfort to be found in the ruins.

This is where we join the story. Prior to chapter 40 which [name] just read from, the people had lived selfishly at the expense of their neighbors. First Isaiah regularly challenged the people’s habit of putting their trust in things rather than God. Their story is a metaphor for the separation between God and God's people and creation whenever people live for themselves at the expense of others. Then, in 587 BCE Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. Many were marched off to Babylon, others left to try to hold things together.

Something I only just noticed in the narrative is that just before today’s reading, King Hezekiah had hosted an envoy from faraway Babylon. This next chapter begins as people are regrouping after the exiles return. In other words, neither the destruction of Jerusalem nor the exile is actually described... as if the editors didn’t need – or couldn’t bear – to talk about what had happened.

Jerusalem lies in ruins. The belief of their day that bad things are a direct result of one’s – or a nation’s – behavior, so many believe they deserved what they got. But, oh, the pain.

This poem speaks to the broken, lost places in every person’s life. We grieve for relationships and lifestyles now lost to us. In the scandal of the day, we lament that our heroes have feet of clay. Our hearts cry for those persons – mostly women – who have silently faced abuse. Regardless of how we voted, we find that our government is sorely challenging those who most need protection. We grieve for our own culpability in the messes we’ve made of our lives.

Can you find parallels between Israel's dilemma and our own?

Today, God speaks to Jerusalem that their punishment is over. Maybe they don’t deserve comfort, not as we understand retributive justice. Some of us don’t believe we deserve comfort either. Still, God insists on offering it. Tenderly, God conveys God’s intention that they will build a future together. God shows compassion, as ever God does – breaking in to the present moment with hope and expectation.

This is what that whole highway in the wilderness thing is about. God announces that God will return to the holy city, to Jerusalem. The people had felt God’s perceived absence keenly. Now Isaiah’s word is that this period of hiddenness is over. Notice that God doesn’t say, "Tell the people to get ready and then I will come." Isaiah conveys God’s voice as that of a lover. "I will come to my people, and nothing will keep me from them, not mountains or valleys or rough places."

We read this poem during Advent because the gospel writers used it to draw attention to another, later experience of God’s unexpected, unearned compassion – Jesus’ coming into the world. The gospel-writers recognized that the kind of love God offers is indescribable, so they used Isaiah’s words to draw a picture as best they could.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Interestingly, this first verse doesn’t contain a verb. It’s not a sentence. Instead, it serves as the title of the gospel. Gospel means good news. No one had ever written a gospel before. When the writer chose to call his work "the good news of Jesus Christ" he gave a name to a new genre of literature.

Gospels are not biographies. They don't claim to recount the history of a person's life. Each gospel account tells the story their own way to convey the truth to their particular audience about God's good news through Christ Jesus. The gospel-writer we call Mark wants to tell us about the beginning of a new era, a time and place in which God has entered human history in an unprecedented way.

This is where we find another connection to the Isaiah text. Mark reminds his audience of way back when God announced that the time of separation was over. God was showing up. Mark uses that part of his readers' memory to say, "It's happened! God is here!"

John's story is part of that announcement. John the baptizer is the messenger. His clothing and eccentric eating habits would have identified him as a prophet like other historic prophets. God is coming to us! he says. Get ready! God's coming. Repent!

John baptizes in the Jordan River, that famous Old Testament boundary marker for "the Promised Land." In the exodus story, the Israelites wandered for forty years before reaching the Jordan. When they entered the waters, they knew their wandering was over and that God's promise was about to be fulfilled.

I know I just pulled in yet another story, but bear with me. You see, John could have baptized people anywhere. By using the River Jordan, people were reminded of that other important Jordan River experience, when God offered another promise. It was an end to the Israelite's desert wanderings and the beginning of life in a home of their own, a land flowing with milk and honey in which God would be their God and they would be God's people.

So Mark reminds us that Jesus came the River Jordan to be baptized. Mark uses that memory to say that once more the time of promise is drawing to a close. The time of fulfillment is drawing near. Advent.

Let's consider again those first words of Mark's gospel – "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." My second epiphany this week was Jesus' arrival – his birth, his baptism, his ministry and everything that happened as a consequence of that ministry – is, by Mark's definition, the beginning of the good news.

God's good news begins with Jesus, but it only begins there. The good news isn't simply the story of Jesus' life – his ministry, death and resurrection – though that's part of it. The good news is that God has broken into the world and, through Jesus' revelation – that is, through Jesus revealing – we can trust that this in-breaking continues. And this good news still unfolds, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Jesus' whole life is the beginning of that good news. His advent into human history marks that beginning, but the good news continues to unfold as God continues to be present and we continue to be co-creators with God in bringing forth God's vision.

That's the message in Isaiah and in Mark. Whatever stories Jesus tells from here on out, whatever miracles, healings, exorcisms or teachings we find in the gospel account, this is the *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ. God actually *wants* to be part of our lives. Behind Mark's interpretation of what God is up to in Jesus is what God has been about all along. In the midst of despair, hopelessness and even devastation, God is here. God is present in all of it.

What does this mean for us this Advent? What does it mean as we get caught up in finding the perfect gift or creating the perfect Christmas? Perhaps the better question is, what does it mean in the face of a world of people struggling with identity questions or impossible expectations, with hunger or hopelessness, with violence or having no voice? For, you see, Mark asks us to notice

God's good news differently. His Jordan River story reminds us that God's good news is not found in the comfortable places or the places of power or influence. No, it's in the wilderness where the whole Judean countryside and all the people were going to encounter John the baptizer.

God's good news is found on the edges, beyond the boundaries of where we expect God to be. God's good news brings hope to those who exist at the margins of our world. It also belongs there. God's good news of grace announces that God's love goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, for God's promise is that there's no place God will not go, no situation where God won't be with us. Our assumptions about what God is supposed to be like, who and what God cares about are turned topsy-turvy when we take Mark's gospel seriously.

Much as we might like it to be tidy, there's none of that. God's active participation in the life of the world is messy and God calls us to be part of that messiness. Using Isaiah's road construction metaphor, we're called to prepare ourselves and our parts of the world to receive God. We're called to make known God's presentness. We're expected to live out the continuation of that very good Good News that Mark first declared.

Today, we're reminded to take the comfort God offers, to accept the tenderness of that comforting. And then, filled with and trusting that God is at work through us, through every aspect of our living, we are to witness to that good news.

May it be so.