

December 10, 2023
Second Sunday of Advent – Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

In the Name of God, whose coming we await. Amen.

This morning, we hear familiar words from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, *Comfort, comfort ye my people, says your God*. These words are deeply lodged in many of our memories, not only because they are splendid words from the prophet, or that we repeat them every third December. We remember these words so well because, in 1741, George Frederic Handel set them to music in *Messiah*.

The eleven verses of Isaiah 40 that we hear this morning account for fully a quarter of the first section of *Messiah*, what we usually call “The Christmas Portion.” How many of us listen to this music every year? I imagine that many of you can complete these phrases:

Every valley (shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low);
And the glory of the Lord (shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together);
He shall feed his flock (like a shepherd).

We remember these words so well because, when they are joined to a melody, they dwell in a deeper place within us. Sometimes, though, familiarity allows us to stay on the surface of a text. So, let’s treat ourselves to a little word study, because it has implications for the way in which we are called to live.

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This morning’s translation reads, “comfort my people.” In the old translation we hear “comfort ye my people.” The verb “comfort” is a plural imperative. Not just, “you, [singular], comfort my people,” but “All y’all comfort my people.” This is important. You and I tend to think of prophecy as something we observe from a distance, as if the prophet operated like the Lone Ranger. In this case, prophecy is a communal enterprise: “ye, comfort my people.”

Then there’s that lovely word “comfort.” Who doesn’t know what comfort means? But is there just the one definition, usually with a sense of, “there, there”? One of the glories of biblical language is the ability for a single word to carry a kaleidoscope of meanings. Comfort can mean console, support, sustain, fortify or strengthen – all at

the same time. But the point is that whatever form the comforting takes, all y'all are supposed to be doing it.

The same thing happens in verse two. The entire community is commanded to speak tenderly and to cry out to Jerusalem that her penalty has been marked "paid in full." Then we hear a single voice crying out, but where? And about what? Does it mean, "A voice cries out: In the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord"? Or does it mean "A voice cries out in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord"?

Our story, formed as it is by the gospel writers, is clearly about a voice in the wilderness, and that voice is John the Baptist, so let's turn to St. Mark.

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In the Roman Empire of Jesus' time, official imperial announcements began with these words: "The beginning of the good news according to Caesar, the Son of God." There were times when these proclamations brought glad tidings, such as the emperor's birthday, or a military victory, or increased grain rations. Other times, such "good news" might order increased taxes. The point was that this good news, the *euangelion*, came from the emperor, the son and heir of his predecessor, who was considered divine.

Into this imperial world comes "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." For the people hearing this proclamation, the irony was clear. This was a counter-narrative to the narrative of empire; it was a rebuke of the world as it was.

Unlike imperial messengers duded up in official garb, the announcer of this good news in Mark wears no fancy clothing. This messenger wears camel hair and eats locusts and honey. He appears in the wilderness, not in a town marketplace, and far from the center of religious authority in Jerusalem and the center of political and economic power in Rome. This messenger appears suddenly, without explanation and without the fanfare of trumpets.

The good news that John the Baptist announces, and that Mark reports, is different in every imaginable way from the good news of Emperor Tiberius. The good news, the God-spell or, as we have come to know it, the gospel of Jesus Christ, offers to the world a different kind of King, the son of the true God, who brings salvation to the whole world. Imagine how this must have sounded, this direct challenge to the good news of Rome and its peace, the *Pax Romana*, which was enforced with brutality, and which did not provide any actual salvation to anyone.

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So, my friends, if we hold today's lessons together, what do we have? On the one hand, there is the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God. On the other

hand, there is the imperative for us, for all of us, to speak consolation, support, sustenance, fortification, and strength to God's people, which by my reckoning would be all people.

Remember what I said at the beginning about these words having implications for the way in which we are called to live? Well, this is where the rubber meets the road. But, how, you ask? What shall I cry?

If we take Mark's gospel seriously, if we believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is vastly different from the good news of the world of the Roman Empire, or the world of the 21st century, we could turn to the words of a modern-day crier-in-the-wilderness, the late Jesuit priest, Fr. Daniel Berrigan. In a piece titled *Advent Credo*, he contrasts the so-called truths of the world with the truths of the ongoing good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.¹

The message of this Second Sunday of Advent is that God calls on all of us to comfort God's people with this – the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is drawing near. Amen.

¹ Daniel Berrigan, S.J. (1921-2016). From *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh*. Orbis Books, 2004.