

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

¹ 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 flesh 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 flesh is 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 news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; 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.

So, are you busy these days? Busy getting ready for Christmas? I can reply with a decisive and disappointing, "No!" I'm not even close. Being home sick all last week certainly delayed many plans I had to get things done. And, it is very unlikely that I will get everything done that I want to get done. As I see it, I have two choices: 1) I can drive myself nuts trying to do everything that "I think" must be accomplished before Christmas day, 2) I can accept and make peace with not getting everything completed, saving myself a lot of heartache, and probably enjoy the journey that remains leading up to Christmas. I confess, the second choice sounds a lot easier said than done for me.

So, I need to ask myself, often, do I NEED to accomplish all these things on my list in order for Christmas to come, or will it come anyhow? Will Christmas lack meaning if I don't get cookies baked or cards sent? The answer to both questions is of course not. I really need to be listening to myself right now. Maybe you also are feeling stressed over getting things ready for Christmas. It is easy to point fingers at secular society and say, "Remember the true reason for the season, Jesus." That pointing finger could easily be redirected towards Christians making the accusation.

Popular advent scriptures like today's text from Isaiah, and the texts about John the Baptist come with the announcement of the coming Messiah; and the importance of preparing something, someone greater than anything we ever imagined. The challenge these texts bring does not impose on us the necessity to attend to the frills and details of our physical existence, but instead we are called to a spiritual preparation, not only during the Christmas season, but every season of our lives.

Isaiah was a prophet, a man sent by God to be the voice of God to the people of Judah, Israel and the surrounding nations. The message he brought to the people commonly stepped on toes, making him less than popular among the people. The book of Isaiah can be divided into two sections, the first 39 chapters were "stepping on toes" material. The people were not honoring the

covenant they made with God; requiring of them relationship, love of God and each other; and worship and obedience to the One true God.

Unfortunately, they often struggled in their walk with God in this covenantal relationship, landing them in a heap of trouble with God. Isaiah tried to warn them, but the people would not listen. God had had enough. Covered by the filth of idolatry and sin, God sends the Babylonians in 586 to completely destroy Israel. They're physically taken off into exile, Their holy city of Jerusalem was lost to them. They become a people living in a land that was not their own. They were a people lost once again in a scary daunting wilderness period, something with which they were well acquainted. For almost 400 years the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. After they got out of that wilderness period, they crossed through the Red Sea with Moses and wandered around in the wilderness for another 40 years. The wilderness is a tough place to be. All they could do was wait and wonder, where was God? would God save them, again?

The concept of being in the wilderness is not unfamiliar. Many of us have been there, are there now, or will likely at some time in our lives, feel lost in the wilderness. Something occurs in our lives, the loss of a job, financial instability, separation and divorce, illness, the death of a loved one, rejection by a friend or family member, something happens, and your world is thrown in disarray.

Nothing feels familiar or safe. You feel lost and alone...abandoned, even abandoned by God. You have no idea how your situation will work out, or how long it will take. You feel like you are wandering, day-in -and-day-out with no sense of direction or feeling of control. Sometimes being in the wilderness can leave one feeling, nothing , nothing at all. That's really scary! We ask, when will it end? Is there any comfort from all this pain and suffering? Is anyone listening? God, are you listening?

This is the condition of the people of Israel before we get to the second section of the book of Isaiah in chapter 40. About 160 years pass between chapter 39 and 40. Isaiah's tone and message from God changes. "Comfort, o comfort my people says your God." The grammatical structure of this sentence indicates that God appears to be addressing the angels and messengers gathered around the heavenly throne. God announces that the time of exile for the Jews is coming to an end. They have paid the price for their sin, and they will be led back to their home.

The message from Isaiah to the people in exile is not like a magical snap of the fingers, one day you are in the wilderness and the next day the wilderness is wiped away and everything returns to normal. If we keep reading, we find Isaiah saying that God comes and brings comfort to meet them in the midst of their wilderness. He comforts them by bringing his presence and guidance to walk with them through and eventually out of the wilderness.

God, joins us in our wilderness, and comforts us there. We don't need to wait until the wilderness period has passed away. Through Isaiah, God says to the people of Israel, and to us, "You don't need to leave the wilderness to encounter comfort. You don't need to leave the wilderness to meet your God. Your God is making a highway that's coming to you, not to just take you out of the wilderness, but to meet you in it." That's what makes this passage so powerful. Comfort is coming and it's coming to meet you IN YOUR wilderness. It's not just taking you out of it, it's meeting you in it.

Isaiah says, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Yes, comfort comes in the midst of the wilderness, the question is, are we ready and willing to receive it? God is at work in changing the terrain so that we can find him even while we are in the wilderness. Preparations on our part are necessary. This means removing obstacles and rolling out the red carpet for God to reach us. Isaiah says, "Get ready to see God at work in

your life." God is going to work with us to make our way through the wilderness, and something new is going to happen, something new is going to come out of that experience.

In my study time for writing this sermon, I came across this quote by an unknown author, **"The turning point in our lives as believers in Christ comes when we stop worshipping the God we WANT and start worshipping the GOD who is!"** It made me think about the struggle we sometimes have as we seek God's help. There are times, especially when we feel lost in the wilderness of life, when we just want to get out of it, we want it to end. So, our expectation of God, the God we want in our lives, is the God who will quickly bring our troubles to an end. Our want becomes an obstacle in clearing the way for God to reach us. If we listen to the words of Isaiah, we realize that when we do this, we risk totally missing the GOD WHO IS, the God who meets us in our troubles and seeks to comfort us, even as we continue our walk through the wilderness periods of our lives.

Further along in Isaiah, he prophesies the Good News that a Messiah will come and free them from their oppression, as well as a forerunner to the Messiah. His prophecy continued to comfort and encourage the people as they looked forward to the day when the Messiah would arrive. So then, if we turn to the Gospel reading for today found in Mark 1, we read, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. 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,' " Sounds familiar, doesn't it? The message here too is that "Something new is going on." There's a new promise that's being fulfilled and it's happening in our midst.

As we know, Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the World did come. God kept His promise. The voice of John the Baptist, the Words of the Gospel keep telling us to prepare the way of the Lord. The word is ever true and powerful! "Prepare! Get ready!" You don't have to have everything perfect in your life, sometimes you can't help that things are a mess in your life, so it's important that we hear that we don't need to leave the wilderness to meet God. God comes to you. He builds a highway to meet you there. In all of your deserts and all your darkness; in the weight of your pain, failures and regrets, God comes to you! He comforts you, in the wilderness, and walks with you into something new. Advent reminds us of this.

The story is told of Shah Abbis, a Persian monarch who loved his people very much. To know and understand them better, he would mingle with his subjects in various disguises. One day he went as a poor man to the public baths and in a tiny cellar sat beside the fireman who tended the furnace. When it was mealtime, the monarch shared his coarse food and talked to his lonely subject. Again and again he visited, and the man grew to love him. One day the Shah told him he was the monarch, expecting the man to ask some gift from him. But the fireman sat gazing at his ruler with love and wonder and at last spoke, "You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to eat my coarse food, to care whether my heart is glad or sorry. On others you may bestow rich presents, but to me you have given yourself, and it only remains for me to pray that you never withdraw the gift of your friendship."

This beautiful story reminds us that Christ, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, left the glories of heaven in order to share himself with us. That gift of his love and friendship will never be withdrawn from us. He chose to be your friend and mine forever, meeting us in our times of joy to celebrate with us; and he comes to us with comfort and peace when we are deep in the throes of the wilderness, to journey with us to a better place. What remains for us is to pray and prepare to welcome him. Amen.