

THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Isaiah 40:1-8
Mark 1:1-8

Second Sunday of Advent
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The VOICE!

The Voice cries out, “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!”

Isaiah the prophet heard the divine Voice and announced the message to the people of Israel. In their exile in Babylon, they remembered Jerusalem – the deserted city, the broken-down walls, the beautiful temple that was no more. They remembered the long sad journey east to what is now Iraq. They were so far away from home. They had been abandoned by God, or so it seemed.

But now the prophet announces something different.

Hear the voice! “Comfort my people!” The Jewish exiles living in Babylon and also in Egypt, and the poorest people left in the devastated Judean countryside needed comfort. The word “comfort” is based on the word for strength. Com-fort is “with strength.” Those verses we heard from Isaiah 40 begin with comfort and tenderness. The prophet acknowledges the troubles of the past and the difficulties of the journey – the mountains, the valleys, the rough roads – if they are allowed to go home. Then comes the good news – God is on the way. The Lord will set things right in divine power, and yet be as gentle as a shepherd with nursing ewes. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and gently lead the mother sheep.” A word of comfort.

Hear the voice in the wilderness! It is a voice of hope. This exile will not last forever. The wilderness may be wide and long, but it isn’t too big for the Lord. Even in the wilderness, there will be a way as smooth and straight as a highway. Of course, the prophet never saw a road like

our freeways, though there certainly were developed roads, even before the Roman period. This highway is a spiritual road for God to travel. God is on the move, ready to make things happen for the good of Israel. The prophet may be discouraged at times – “All the people are grass, and their faithfulness is like the flower of the field,” he says. We know how easy it is to look at our problems and think that we’ll never get beyond them. Yet the prophet has hope – “The word of our God will stand forever.” He has a vision of God returning to the cities of Judea. The hope was so strong and clear that it became good news to be announced in the present time. “Here is your God!” That wilderness was not too big for God. Many of the exiles did return home. This is a word of hope.

Hear the voice, and pay attention! “Prepare the way of the Lord!” The message is a call to action. If there is to be a highway, maybe God needs road-builders, or at least assistant road-builders. The journey home will not be without effort. But the Lord will be leading, and eventually some of the exiles did return to Jerusalem.

In an echo of the prophet centuries later, John the Baptizer in the wilderness had the same message: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” He called the people of Judea to repentance, so that they would be ready for what God would soon do. This last in a line of old-time prophets announced God’s message and called for a serious response, and the people came to him from Jerusalem and the countryside. They made a public declaration of faith as they passed through the waters of the Jordan River and went home to a new way of life, even as they waited for the One who would baptize them with God’s Holy Spirit. When that promised Messiah arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, they were ready to hear his message.

The voice is speaking still. It calls to **us** to “prepare the way of the Lord.” Advent is a time for that preparation. We’re not just getting ready for another Christmas celebration during

these days of December. The voice in the wilderness calls us to prepare more thoughtfully for a new coming of Christ to us, and a deeper understanding of who this coming One is.

We are a church in exile. We haven't met together since the middle of March, nearly nine months. We haven't sung together, or prayed together in the same room. Our opportunities for service have been curtailed, with no Community Meals to help serve, no Warming Center in operation, and other service activities operating with fewer volunteers. I'm very thankful that we can have weekly worship recorded, and weekly real-time Bible study and fellowship time on Zoom, but it's not quite the same, is it? I miss singing together, which for me is praying together.

In this strange year of 2020, what is the divine voice saying to us? It is still the voice of comfort. For some of us, life will never be the same again. Even if we don't know anyone who has died of COVID-19, we know people, members of this congregation, who have died, whose family was unable to hold a service. If you're anything like me, we may be wondering how old we'll be before we can visit family in far-away places, and if we'll still be up to traveling. I need to hear the voice that offers comfort and tenderness, with strength for the journey ahead. "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and gently lead the mother sheep."

Do you hear the voice? It is the voice of hope. All is not lost. The church, in one form or another, will continue. I came across a word of hope from the Christian community in Ethiopia, where the Good News of Jesus came long before European colonization, probably by way of Egypt. In an ancient form of liturgy, the Ethiopian Christians proclaim, "The Gift of God can never be destroyed by man. Civilizations pass, but praising of God in a heavenly manner will never cease. May God bless you and grant you his grace eternally." That is long-term hope. We may hope for a shorter-term version, and pray that we'll be together again next year. We believe

that God will lead us gently through whatever changes are necessary. But in the long-term, I need to remember that “civilizations may pass away, but the praise of God will never cease.” It is a voice of hope.

Do you hear the voice? It is a call to action. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Get ready! John the Baptist was also a voice calling in the wilderness. He urged the people to repent, that is, to turn toward God, and to do it publicly. He held out the promise of forgiveness for sins, for the ways we miss the mark and let God down. John prepared the way for God’s Anointed One, and he called the people to prepare themselves. Our work of preparation this Advent may be to clear the way in our own daily routines and in our hearts, to make a straight path for the coming of Christ to us. It’s so easy to feel helpless and discouraged. It’s easy to get frustrated at leaders, at neighbors, at this shutdown, or even get frustrated at ourselves. But repentance is a call to change our minds, to turn around, to view life from God’s perspective. It is a call to accept divine forgiveness and to forgive others, and to make amends where we can. The Spirit of God is already at work in this wilderness where we find ourselves, and we are called to join in that work of announcing the Good News of comfort and hope.

On this second Sunday of Advent, let us hear the voice, with its message of comfort and call to repentance. Let us listen for the voice in the wilderness, with its message of forgiveness and good news. God is both coming and already at work. This Advent, this week, today, may we prepare the way for the One who comes among us – Christ the Lord. Amen.