

Sermon – December 6, 2020
“Herald of Good Tidings”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text – Isaiah 40:1-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning everyone and welcome to the second Sunday in Advent. I also want to welcome everyone on the live stream and invite you to send us a comment to let us know that you have joined us.

Many times, when we hear the lectionary text read, we are faced with the dilemma that we lack the context that surrounds the text. Often the text can stand alone and needs little if any help in the form of background, as the words of God are beautiful words that give clear guidance for our lives. This morning’s text is certainly beautiful by itself, but if we understand the context of these verses, then we will be better able to find God’s message for us this day. One of the key background items we need to know is that for the bulk of the thirty-nine chapters that proceed this text in this book, Isaiah has been crying out to the people of Israel. Isaiah has been telling those who have turned from the LORD they are about to be punished for their decisions and actions that have led them away from the one true God. Isaiah’s words are a strong warning to a nation that has begun to worship other gods and idols. His message is clear: if the people of Israel will not repent, turn from their sins, and return to following God, they will be punished. As an example, hear these words from Isaiah 34:2-4, “For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hordes; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree.” Can we catch the Lord’s displeasure with Israel and the nations around her? After thirty-nine chapters of some very difficult words that point to the coming punishment of Israel, we turn the page from the end of chapter 39 to chapter 40 and everything that Isaiah speaks changes. If you

were mapping the content of Isaiah chapter by chapter, as those in the Bible study at Afton are learning to do with the Gospel of John, chapter 40 marks a change, a new beginning, a radical shift in the content of the word the prophet Isaiah receives from the LORD. God begins to tell the people, all people, through Isaiah that something new, something unheard of, is about to happen. God has Isaiah tell the remnant in Babylon that they will return from their exile. Not just a few who escape and find their way back, but a large number of the exiles will return, and the land of Israel will once again be a place for the people of God. This is an unheard-of event. People who have been taken into another country have never returned from that exile to the land they once held. Instead, they are absorbed or eliminated as a people by the impact of exile. This is what happens with the northern kingdoms taken to Assyria. But God has Isaiah tell the exiles that God will bring about this unheard-of event. If we look into the history of Israel, we will learn that they do go into exile in Babylon, but that they are released when Cyrus overthrows Babylon. They are able to return to the Promised Land not by their merit, but by God acting on their behalf. This is not something that happens to exiles. This is God's mighty hand once again raised on behalf of God's people. They have been punished for their sins, but God, through his personal intervention, will restore Israel to their land. God again will show forth His steadfast love for Israel. As we read this text, we need to be mindful that these words were not written for Israel alone. The prophet speaks to all people. The prophet speaks to the near-term restoration of Israel to the Promised Land, and the prophet speaks to a future time when God will act to restore all people by extending His steadfast love on their behalf. Chapter 40 marks for us a transition from a warning of coming punishment to something new, God's steadfast love in action to restore and redeem.

Did we catch the starting words of this scripture? "Comfort, O comfort my people ..."

What do we find comforting? Some of the comforting things that come to my mind include sitting by the woodstove on a cold, wintry day, reading a good book, resting in a cushioned chair, wearing old clothes that have worn to my liking, hearing words that build up from a loved one or close friend, sipping a warm cup of hot chocolate. The list of comforts is long and different for each of us. When God speaks to Isaiah, His words are no longer words of punishment, but words of comfort. This is a major change in what the prophet is hearing from God.

What do we think the exiles in Babylon would find comforting? They are strangers in a foreign land. They must work for everything they need. They are struggling to live and to be a

people in a foreign land. The very words they hear each day, in a language they may yet struggle to understand, remind them of the pain they have as exiles in this foreign land. To them come words from God, “Comfort, O comfort my people ...” The message from God is that their struggle is ended and their punishment is complete. God is offering them words that are tender, loving, and an invitation into a joyful dance with Him that brings forth the joy long silenced in their hearts. God may have disciplined his wayward children, but now he speaks tender words to them, words of comfort.

A voice cries out to them to make a way for the Lord to come to them from the wilderness. God is coming to restore. Nothing can stand in the way of the coming of the Lord, not the rough planes, deep valleys, or high mountains, not even the wilderness. None of these physical impediments to movement can prevent the coming of God to comfort His people. God’s comforting words are for the people in exile good news that those who cannot help themselves are to receive help. They are to be set free. They are to return to their land. Just as in Egypt when there was no one to help them, no one to release them from cruel bondage, God again comes to them through all obstacles. Once again, God is planning something new, the release and restoration of those in exile, the return to the land that was and is a covenant promise. These are comforting words.

As we listen to the words of comfort, as we hear that God is a God who acts, we catch a glimpse of the mercy God has for the exiles. We should also catch that these words of comfort, restoration, and mercy are not just for the exiles, but are for all people. There is more to these prophetic words than just good news for these exiles. God loves all people and while the example of restoration of Israel is in sight, there is also a distant-in-time view of God acting that we should catch in Isaiah’s prophecy. Here, in the season of Advent, God speaks to another coming, another time when He will act, another time when His people will be set free. This is a time when those with no hope will be restored by the mercy of God, not as a physical rescue of God’s people, but a release for all people from their bondage to sin and death. This is truly something new, something radical that God will do. Someone is coming, true comfort is coming. It is the season when we anticipate the coming of God.

Can we imagine what must have happened in Babylon when the Jews heard this news? They would be free one day to leave, to go and rebuild their place of worship, to return to their homes, and to once again enjoy the land of promise. I suspect when they heard this news and its

meaning had sunk into their hearts, they lifted up their voices and spread the good news that God had acted everywhere they went. I suspect there were tears of joy and much anticipation of a return. I suspect that they shouted it from the mountain tops, from the rooftops, and from all of the high places they could access so that all could hear the good tidings.

Have any of us ever had a day when we felt like withered grass, the grass that is cut and dries up in the heat of the sun? Humans all have this limitation. The exiles no doubt felt like withered grass. Humanity also is like the grass, and over time, over the course of their lifetimes, people begin to dry up and wither. God's word stands in contrast to this idea of something that quickly passes away, as it endures forever. The promises God sent to the Israelites in exile came true and they were allowed, no, they were encouraged to return from exile to the Promised Land. What God has promised comes true. Stand on those promises. Count on them even as we wither away in the heat and length of our days. God's word may be trusted forever. We are to be a people who trust that these words are for us and for the generations to come. We are to anticipate the coming of the salvation of the Lord.

Do we have any good news to share with those around us? During Advent we anticipate the coming of Jesus as a baby. And yes, if we are not diligent, that good news can and will get absorbed in the holiday season. Are we seeking to share this good news? Are we mountain top heralds? Do we have tears of joy in anticipation of the coming of the Lord? Are we those who are shouting this Good News from the mountain tops? Are we heralds of the coming of God? This past week the nativity set went up at the church. And as I thought about that experience, I was reminded of a nativity set that once was put up on our dining room buffet when I was a young child in West Virginia. There were shepherds and Mary and Joseph and a baby in a manger sheltered by a cardboard shed painted gold. There was a little light in the upper left corner that shone like a star on the porcelain scene. I remember standing there looking up at this display in awe. (I was a lot shorter then.) Have you ever just stood and gazed upon this scene, upon the nativity sets we put up? Have you ever just let this good news reach deep into your heart, into your soul? Have we stood on a cold, clear, still night and looked upon one of these scenes of God coming to all His people and wondered about what God was doing? I confess to you that while I was drawn to that display as a child, I did not understand what I beheld, nor will I claim to understand this mystery that is God's steadfast love for us today. As I did research for this passage in Isaiah, I ran into a discussion about what God was doing when he spoke to this

coming. The coming of God has in its foundation the loss of Eden. That beautiful garden where humans once walked with God was lost in the moment the apple was eaten and sin entered into all humanity. There is no recovering that place; sin has destroyed it forever. But God is able to create something even better, new heavens and new earth that are even better than Eden.

Throughout the Bible, there is described something better than the blessings that Eden once held. This is the God we seek to serve, a God who is steadfast love. God is a Creator who is able to do something new, to create something unheard of, to bring into existence something we have never thought of or ever will. We are not seeking to return to Eden; we are not invited to go back there. Instead, we are invited into something new, something better, something so mysterious that we can only gaze upon the scene of a baby born in a manger and wonder about the depth of God's steadfast love. This is progress, progress that only a Creator can bring. This is what we anticipate in this season of Advent. Even if we cannot completely understand the things we behold, they can transform us from death to life, from those in exile to those restored to God. This is the season of anticipation. This is the season of sharing this great good news that God is coming to restore us, to have mercy upon us, to love us, and enable us to love God.

Are we heralds of this good news? Our decorations speak to this coming event. Our worship speaks to the coming of something new. Our lives should also speak to those around us that there is good news of great joy for all people. What can we do to share this great good news? What can we do to share this same magnetic mercy that God extended to Israel to all people around us? What mountain will we climb and shout from during this season of Advent? James Muilenburg wrote about this scripture in Isaiah, saying that, "the arm raised in triumph is lowered in compassion."¹ Here in this passage from Isaiah, two complementary sides of God's nature are on display. The arm that triumphs over obstacles and clears the way to allow the coming of God into our situations is the same arm that is lowered to embrace us. God's mercy is for exiles. God's steadfast love is for all people. The arm that overcomes, reaches down to gather us up and hold us in his bosom. The Creator of all things is making all things new. The Creator of all things is coming into the world to overcome all obstacles, to break the power of evil with his mighty arm, and then to gather up the broken hurting people into his gentle, loving arms.

This is the picture that we see in the final verses of this passage from Isaiah. We see the one who "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." This one comes not with the raised arm of

power, but like a shepherd who gathers a little newborn lamb exposed to the cold and holds it close so that its body might become warm again and the lamb might have life, abundant life. This is a relationship that is beyond what we expect. This is the one whose coming we anticipate throughout the season of Advent. Our response to his coming is to prepare our hearts, repent, and let the Lord transform us into his people. We are to be heralds of this good news in word and deed. And so, let us love God and then love others in this same manner. This morning we have the opportunity to have communion with Jesus, to enter into the mystery of communion with the God who comes. Let us prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming this day. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Pray with me: Lord, come and do a new work in us. Let us be transformed by your steadfast love into your people. Lord, help us to be heralds of the great good news that God is coming. Open our hearts to the love you have for us that we may in turn comfort those in despair and darkness with this great good news. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen

¹ Oswalt, John N.. The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (Kindle Locations 1511-1514). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.