

Advent 2B. December 10, 2017.
Dungeness Valley Lutheran
Church, Sequim, WA. Isaiah
40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2
Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8. "Just
the Beginning"

Isaiah 40

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak 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.

³A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way
of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.

⁴Every 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.

⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall
be revealed,
and all people shall see it
together,
for the mouth of the Lord has
spoken.'

⁶A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower
of the field.

⁷The grass withers, the flower
fades,
when the breath of the Lord
blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.
⁸The grass withers, the flower
fades;

but the word of our God will
stand for ever.

⁹Get 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!'

¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with
might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹He 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

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;
³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

Isaiah did not know what to say. That's kind of rough for a preacher. A voice says, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?" So he says what he sees, "All people are grass...the grass withers when the breath of the LORD blows upon it."

Centuries later, when John preached, he distanced himself from the power and religion of the city, went out to the wilderness, and called the people to repent, to acknowledge their sins and take a different path.

What would Isaiah or John preach today?

Listen to the news, read the paper. "Fake news" – also known as false witness – lying – what the 8th Commandment forbids. "Sexual misconduct" – breaks the 6th and often the 5th Commandment. Great numbers of people leaving church or worship – not keeping the 3rd Commandment. Laws and taxes that take from the poor and give to the rich – sounds like stealing to me: breaking the 7th Commandment. Lack of care for aging people – not heeding the 4th Commandment. Unending war and consequent constant killing – the 5th Commandment shudders. What have I missed? Coveting...well, that's alive and well. And the constant use of God's name in everyday conversation that's not prayerful. That leaves Number One – having no other God. We search our hearts. Sometimes we weep.

Like Isaiah, "What shall I cry?" Like John, "Repent. Change your ways."

It seems we are living in the wilderness of flagrant disregard of the Commandments. Our public lives have drifted off course. Like ancient Israel, we are far from home, far from the society we desire. Much has been destroyed.

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Jeanie loved college. Classes were exciting and she met a lot of new people. She was too far away from home to make it back for Thanksgiving, so she went to a roommate's home. Nice, she thought, but not "home." As the days shortened and Christmas approached, she became depressed; she didn't join in the spirit of dorm decorations, parties, concerts. She knew her parents could not come to get her; one or two trains could help her make the trip, but so expensive. One day at lunch, she ran into the one person she knew from the Seattle area. She asked if she could ride with him as far as his home. He was happy to tell her YES, he would drive her home.

Suddenly things looked and felt brighter. A huge burden had been lifted. Yes, she was still homesick. Yes, there were stresses around exams and finding time to study. But she found she could enjoy the Christmas parties and her choir concert

and she felt more relaxed. She had the PROMISE of a RIDE HOME! And she lived in that promise during the weeks of waiting.

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Isaiah was Israel's pastor when the people were far from home. Another Isaiah was Israel's pastor when they returned home and found it wrecked. John was Israel's pastor centuries later when the Romans ruled them. They all had two messages. There is a problem and there is a solution.

Like Jeanie, there was a problem finding her way home and the young man from Seattle offered a solution.

All flesh is grass, said Isaiah. Repent, said John. Pay attention and call sin in public life by its name, we say to one another today.

John and Isaiah both talk of making a road straight. Israel wanted a clear road through the desert back to Jerusalem, not a road like their Exodus wanderings that took 40 years. The Romans knew about building roads. A messenger would be sent out and hordes of workers would build a clear, straight road for the king or emperor to drive on. We know about road-building too...just ask anyone driving to or from Forks or around Chicken Coop Road or waiting for the Hood Canal Bridge to let the submarines pass. Delays, waiting, and hopes that one could just please drive straight through.

We long for a clear road. For a ride home at Christmas. For the hospitals to send forth healed people. For the aging folks in nursing homes to have visitors, carolers, comfort. For our society to wake up to injustices and fix them. For our children to find spiritual connection with our Lord. For us to find consolation in the midst of our own personal doubts and worries. For a road HOME TO GOD.

And so, dear Gospel writer Mark, well acquainted with the words of Isaiah and with the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus, begins his account of the divine solution:

“This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

“This is the beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, Son of God.”

To people in Mark's day, this opening line sounded like praise of Caesar: “This is the military victory of your anointed, conquering king.” It didn't sound spiritual, or humble, or anything like the Jesus we know.

Mark skips right over the Bethlehem stable, the angels, the shepherds, the wise kings. He goes right to the patron saint of Advent waiting/of homesickness/of

wilderness/of hunger and thirst for righteousness... the strong preacher: John the Baptist. John will prepare us for the story of Jesus. This is just the beginning.

This will not be a Gospel of worldly glory. John the Baptist will die young by the hand of a weak king. This will be a Gospel of the Cross. This story will end with the anointed Jesus hanging as a criminal, then buried in a borrowed grave, his followers gone except for Joseph of Arimathea and a few terrified women who ran out of the cemetery a couple days later, claiming they heard unbelievable words from angels.

But Mark's Good News of Jesus Christ gave hope in place of hopelessness.

John the Baptist said: get ready, prepare yourselves. Be washed clean from the past that strangles you, from the sins that trouble you. For someone is coming who is powerful. And gentle: Isaiah's shepherd – like Jesus -- will gather the lambs in his arms, and gently lead the mother sheep. This shepherd has the goal of getting everyone home, every night.

This is just the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Who lived, died and was raised and lives among us today.

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Years ago, in Port Townsend, I buried the wife of a dear man who himself was very old and sick. As the niche in the wall was closed, his wife's ashes inside, John stepped forward with his cane and with a loud voice proclaimed, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus." A modern-day John the Baptist – acknowledging the one more powerful than he. Pointing to Jesus Christ, his comfort, his friend, the one who overcame death, the only one who could give the hope, comfort and strength that he needed at that moment and would need until he himself would be called home.

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What would Good News sound like for you? The doctor's words, "You are cancer-free." "You'll be a grandpa." "Your job is secure." "You passed that exam." "I'll stay with your loved one for a while, so you can go out for an hour." For John at his wife's grave, it was hearing the church's words of comfort, "If we are buried with Christ, we shall also rise with Christ."

SHOUT this supreme good news, O Holy Spirit, into our good ear!

We may be as fleeting as grass, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. Your sins are forgiven! God has gone beyond the limits of earth and heaven to feed this

flock like a shepherd, gathering the lambs – the children, the grandparents, the fathers -- and leading the mother sheep – giving all of us the confidence in the PROMISE that we do indeed have a RIDE HOME. In this promise God makes Godself present to us today – to help us share love with our neighbor, to live in faith and hope.

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Thank you, Mark, for your Gospel. Thank you, John the Baptist, for your proclamation of Jesus. Thank you, people of God, for your steady and constant faith.

For it is in the wilderness of our world – the homesick wilderness, the John-the-Baptist wilderness, the everyday wilderness of our lives -- that the glory of the Lord is glimpsed until the day when “all people shall see it together!” This is just the beginning. God’s promises sustain you as you live in grace your whole life long. + Amen.

Good outtake:

My spouse has traveled in China where he has seen amazing roads built very straight. Tunnels through mountains and immense high bridges over valleys, as though someone drew a line from A to B and said, “Build!” In Isaiah’s words, “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....for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Vocabulary: Exile means living somewhere away from your home, usually in a foreign land.

What was Jeanie’s problem?

What helped her finish the semester?

Who was Israel’s pastor and prophet when Israel lived in exile in Babylon?

What is some bad news today?

Choose One: Mark began his Gospel with the story of

- a. angels and shepherds
- b. wise men
- c. John the Baptist

What unexpected GOOD NEWS did John the Baptist preach?

How is John the Baptist's GOOD NEWS helpful to you OR What promise of God's helps you live a meaningful life?