

**“Comfort My People”
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
Advent 2/Service of Hope and Remembrance**

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

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,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And 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.

Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Isaiah 40:1-11

¹Comfort, 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 forever.

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.

The Sermon

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

You haven't had an easy year. Nobody has.

Some have had a catastrophic year.

And with the perpetual nonsense being geysered at us
from high places and histrionic newsrooms
and spectacularly unreliable social media,

along with the deliberate undermining of many of our once-trusted
foundations,

it seems like—it *feels* like—practically everybody who's not flat on their
back is, at best, un-surefooted, standing uneasily on wobbly legs at the
moment.

Add into that context whatever challenges you may be dealing with
personally,
professionally,
educationally,
in relationships,
in your own or your family's health—
physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional.

Then add in the expectation that it's December, and it's Advent, and
we're supposed to be singing happy songs. Only sometimes, we don't
feel like singing a happy song.

Psalm 137 is a lament from the time immediately following the defeat
and destruction of Jerusalem, the displacement and forced relocation of
their people, and the erasing from the face of the earth of the Temple,
which was the center of the Covenant People's understanding of who

they are, and the center of their understanding of how the structure of the universe works.

Everything they used to think held the world together and gave context to their living, the way they worshiped, the way they interacted with one another, the way they shopped for food, even whether or not they could get together and sing their songs—everything they knew and understood about how life works had been turned upside down or taken away.

And those who had been spirited off to Babylon, to be re-educated as something other than the Covenant People of God, produced Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down,
and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.*

*For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

How could we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?

Christmastime is itself an impossible dream—you can find yourself investing in the hope that this year, you’ll get it right; this year, we’ll wake up in a Christmastime dream that looks and feels and smells and tastes and sounds just like Christmas ought to, whatever you imagine that perfection to be.

Partly for that very reason, Christmastime can be tough.

And so, as people of God whom God has called into being in our own time, with our own lives, each sacred to God, we think about our past, and we look to God’s future.

We remember. And we hope.

And somewhere a distant voice calls out: In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

“Perhaps you have come to your present station in life for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

“For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

And so we look at the communion cup, and we remember.

We remember when we drank from it together. We remember when our hearts burned within us when we gathered for Holy Communion.

And we look at the nativity scene, and we remember that we are here for God’s purpose: to witness, to share our story, to care, or to gather, or to provide for those with nothing—who, we are assured, are directly identified with God.

And we remember we have a past, and a present, and a future.

*And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!ⁱ*

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

“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.”

The slate is clean, because it was our savior’s will to make it clean even if he has to do it himself; and his instruction from here is simple and direct: Now go, and sin no more.ⁱⁱ

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

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ⁱ Lyric by Edmund Sears, 1849.

ⁱⁱ John 5:14, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you,” and 8:11, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”