

Rev. Dr. Susan Andrews
“The Wilderness Way”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

*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.*

A voice cries out:

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
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.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'*

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

*And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
Get 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!'
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,*

*and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
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.*

Mark 1:1-8

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.'

Kirkwood friends, it is a joy for me to be with you this morning. My very first trip to St. Louis was about 20 years ago when I came to be part of a clergy gathering here at First Presbyterian Church in Kirkwood. It was during that time that I met Ron Evens. And as the years unfolded, my daughter and her husband moved to St. Louis. We lived on the East Coast and Ron and Hanna became surrogate parents for our daughter, and Ron made sure Anna had her first job in the St. Louis public schools. So, I'm indebted to them and to others. Jim Madsen and I had served at the national level of the church and I've enjoyed getting to know your staff over the years. So, it is very good for me to be with you this morning and you will be in my prayers in this time of transition in the life of your congregation.

Let us pray. God through your prophet Isaiah you remind us that the word of the Lord will stand forever. Help us to hear these words today as your message for us in these difficult weeks and months in 2020. Help us to hear good news even as we deal with difficult news. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. It makes us perk up our ears and lean forward. Good news in a bad news world and Lord knows we are ready for something new and good. All this pandemic pain and political paralysis and economic anxiety. Yes, we are ready for something new. Perhaps the joy and innocence of a baby, the miracle of new birth. Now, of course, that is how Matthew and Luke begin their gospels, but not Mark. The earliest of the Gospels, this lean taught, terrifying gospel, it begins not with birth but with jarring judgment and prophetic passion. Mark, who proclaims right out of the box that the good news is Jesus Christ. Mark makes it clear that the good news is not a fairy tale about bouncing babies. No. The good news is hard news, and it begins amidst the shards of our broken lives. You see, the good news begins by telling the truth. and so, what is John the Baptist's troubling truth? Repent, confess, turn around, go in a new direction. Prepare a highway in the desert of your broken promises and your broken dreams.

Whatever our political persuasion, the news this week about threats of violence are appalling, calling for nooses and firing squads to murder election workers, urging vigilantes to kill an administration security expert who proclaimed that the election was safe and secure. And yet I believe that all of us, in some way, is implicated in these threats because we tend to listen only to those with whom we agree. We overdose on polemic arguments that skewer the other side. We rail against health restrictions that inconvenience our own personal freedom. Yes, when citizens are only concerned about me and not concerned about we, it is then that our universal God weeps. And so, John the Baptist tells us the truth. Repent. Confess. Turn around. Prepare a highway in the desert of your broken promises and your broken dreams.

I, like most of you, are deeply concerned about the environmental disaster that climate change foretells. The devastating fires, the drought, the floods, the melting ice, the extinction of species, the marginalized communities most injured by pollution and overcrowding. And yet, most of us continue our destructive habits using disposable plastics, burning too much fossil fuel eating much too much red meat. And so, John the Baptist tells us the truth. Repent. Confess. Turn around. Go in a new direction. Prepare a highway in the desert of your broken promises and your broken dreams. The statistics of gun violence and suicide in this country continue to top the world's grim statistics. In the United States, we are 100 times more likely to be shot than any other country in the world. And this week, we read about an escalation of death penalty executions in our federal prisons. I was horrified to learn that the four nations with the highest death penalty numbers in the world are China, Iran, Vietnam, and the United States. What kind of brutal company are we keeping? And so, John the Baptist tells us the truth. Repent. Confess. Turn around. Go in a new direction. Prepare a highway in the desert of your broken promises and your broken dreams. The pandemic has just heightened the precarious survivability of many Protestant churches in America. Statistics show that younger Americans are staying away in droves. Even as we continue to resist change and shelter away from the crying human need outside our sturdy church doors. And so, John the Baptist tells us the truth. Repent. Confess. Turn around. Go in a new direction. Prepare a highway in the desert of your broken promises and your broken dreams.

Well, by now, I imagine that some of you are muttering to yourselves, "Enough already. It's Christmas for God's sake. Stop this relentless mantra of judgment and sin. This depressing litany of doom and gloom." But my friends, that is what we always say when we are confronted by prophets, when we are confronted by the truth. And in scripture, the prophets Elijah and Amos and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and yes, Jesus. The prophets are ostracized and criticized and even killed for speaking the truth. Except that today in Mark's Gospel, a very strange thing happens. Today, the text tells us that people from all over Judea in Jerusalem, crowds of people, are thronging to hear the prophet, John. They are eagerly gathering to be bombarded by the truth. Why? Because they sense that in the midst of this brutal truth there is also the blessed truth, the good news that with God, and in God, and only by God, all things will be new.

Now, I think we often think of the Old Testament as discomfoting, and the New Testament as comforting. But this morning, all of that is reversed. There are no more comforting words than Isaiah's vision in today's prophecy. You see the first thirty-nine books of Isaiah are all about telling the truth about the reality of Israel's sin and about the failing flailing people who have been dragged into exile for 150 years because of their broken promises and their broken dreams. But then in a stunning reversal, Chapter 40 turns everything around. The people are still failing and flailing in the arid desert of exile. But now God, through the prophet, transforms judgment into joy.

"Comfort my people," God says to Isaiah, "Tell my people that I am no longer angry with them. Tell my people that I want everyone back. Speak tenderly, Isaiah. Proclaim that the glory of the Lord has come, that the glory of the Lord is coming, that the glory of the Lord will come again. And all of you will see it. And we will see it together." "Isaiah," God says, "tell my people that all of the rough places will be made smooth. And the low places in their lives shall be brought high. And that chaotic meandering in a pandemic will find a straight path toward wholeness. Yes, Isaiah, tell my people that the mercy of the Lord will pick up Israel like a shepherd carrying a lamb. I, the Lord, will pick up Israel and carry her home. I, the Lord, will pick up a dying and locked down

pandemic world and carry her home. I, the Lord, will pick up a politically fractured America and carry her home. I, the Lord, will pick up a battered and troubled American church and carry her home. Yes, Isaiah, because you have spoken the truth, because the people have faced their truth, because all of you are still the treasure of my heart, I, the Lord, will carry you home. And I will make everything new."

My friends, these are the words, and this is the memory that John the Baptist evokes today as he proclaims the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Yes, John is announcing that the glad tidings first imagined by Isaiah have now become real. They are and will be incarnated. They will become flesh and provide a new way, a way through which all of us can start over, a way by which all of us can become fresh and forgiven and free. The way is embodied in the tenderness of a baby, a baby who will grow up to be God with us welcoming the stranger, turning enemies into friends, confronting the injustices of a fractured world, healing the bruises of our hearts. Yes, Jesus is coming to comfort us so that we can become comfort for others. During this Advent season, so much around us seems scary, and fragile, and difficult. But there is a tomorrow. You see, as Christians, hope is our middle name. Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is not pie in the sky abstractions. Hope is God's promise. And hope is God's Good News. So, this morning the prophet reminds us that we cannot really hear this Good News until we first confess the bad news-- until we tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth about who we really are. And so, John the Baptist, with austere and practical pastoral care, tells us the truth. Repent. Confess. Turn around. Go in a new direction. Prepare a highway in the midst of your broken promises and your broken dreams.

Years ago, I was part of a clergy gathering at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, a congregation which includes some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the Philadelphia area. Part of that experience was listening to a panel of men and women from the business community. They had been asked to tell us, the pastors of the world, what they, the movers and shakers of the world-- what they need to hear from the church. Contrary to what I had expected, these people do not want to just hear words of comfort. They want to be held accountable for the rich gifts and privileges they have been given. Yes, week in and week out, they want to be called to repent, to confess, to turn around, so that when push comes to shove in the boardrooms of America, they will find the wisdom to be faithful and the courage to be just.

One woman on the panel summarized it all. She said, "I come to worship, in order to pray and to sing and to listen. But most of all, I come for the benediction because that is the moment that I am reminded who I am. That is the moment when one more time, I am pushed by God out into the world in order to be the transforming presence of Christ." This, of course, is the benediction that is used every week at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. "Go out into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold on to what is good. Return no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering. Honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit--" which, of course, is just an elegant way of echoing John's words of honesty and hope. "Repent and prepare the way of the Lord." May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

