

Scripture Reading for December 6th 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

40 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Mark 1:1-8 (NIV)

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Sermon: “Here is Your God!”

Isaiah 40 begins the second volume of the book of Isaiah written some 150 years after chapters 1 to 39 and obviously by a different author! The first Isaiah was based in Jerusalem,¹ the second Isaiah was based in Babylon during the time of the exile.² The word Isaiah itself means “The LORD Saves,” and our reading today from Isaiah 40 is in keeping with such a name. You may be familiar with elements of Isaiah 40 because some of its words are immortalized in “Comfort Ye My People” from Handel's Messiah,³ and if that doesn't take your fancy, its words are also part of a well-known song, “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord,” from the musical Godspell.⁴ Indeed, words from Isaiah 40 are cited in all four gospels⁵ in connection with John the Baptist, which is why this passage has importance beyond the writer's original audience. But before we consider that aspect, let's begin with the initial context for Isaiah 40.

We have to imagine a grand, heavenly throne room with God surrounded by angels and archangels. And let's remember, the Jews are in exile in Babylon; they are waiting with fading hope for God to speak and to act. They are grieving and futureless; virtually everything that gave them a cultural identity has gone. Into this crisis God gives a new command to his divine assembly,⁶ “Comfort and keep comforting *my people*.”⁷ That reference to *my people* is important; it reminds us of the covenant *relationship* he still has with Israel. God then says, “Tell them to take heart, speak *tenderly* to them because her time of judgement is over, the sentence is complete, her guilt has been pardoned - or paid off *completely*.”⁸ The hearers of these words are to be reassured by this message; it means God is still *their* God. And he is still on the throne and he is about to act. In response, one of members of the heavenly court shouts out instructions: “Clear a road through the desert for the LORD! Level a highway in the wilderness for our God! Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill lowered, the uneven ground made level and the ridges become a plain. Then the *presence* of the LORD shall appear and *all humankind* together will see it, for God himself has spoken.”⁹ This presents a picture of the exiles leaving Babylon with their

¹ c. 742-701/689(?) BC. FYI: The dates of the Babylonian exile are c. 597/587 (in phases) to 538 BC.

² c. 540-537 BC. Many scholars propose a 3rd Isaiah for after 537 BC, when some Jews returned back to Jerusalem from exile, and who wrote chapters 24-27, 56-66. (Second Isaiah is thought to have written chapters 34-35, 40-55.)

³ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Pz9BCMFoP8> .

⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1SiaCV26aQ> .

⁵ See: Matt 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23. See also 1 Pet 1:24-25.

⁶ This picture of a divine assembly also corresponds with the Babylonian, Canaanite, and Mesopotamian images of the day, where decisions were made that determine the destiny of human beings.

⁷ Complete Jewish Bible (CJB): <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isa+40%3A1-11&version=CJB> . Note: this is Hebrew *poetry*, not prose. The words in Hebrew are *plural* (lost in English translation), hence the heavenly court drama.

⁸ Isa 40:2. The (strange) double payment may be a reference to Exod 22:7 (punishment for theft); paid *in full* is implied. There is no explicit statement claiming that God provided unjust humiliation, or was “overdoing it” as it were.

⁹ Isa 40:3-5, adapted from the *Tanakh*, CJB, NRSV. Thematically, God is portrayed as coming to Israel from the east. Similarly, in the Gospel accounts, Jesus approaches Jerusalem from the east for that last Passover Week. (For the LORD's “presence” see also “divine radiance.”)

heads held high, traveling effortlessly on a level highway - contrasting not just with the way they came to Babylon as captives but the harsh journey through the wilderness in the time of Moses.¹⁰

Then another instruction is shouted out: “Proclaim!” and the prophet¹¹ replies: “What shall I preach?” An angelic being replies: “All humanity is merely grass or wildflowers that dry up and fade, but the word of our God *is always* fulfilled.”¹² It seems the prophet needed both reassurance and instruction as precisely *what* to say, after all, he doesn’t want to proclaim empty promises to an already despondent audience. The message he is to pass on is that even their powerful Babylonian captors are frail humans whose days are numbered, and God asserts their rule is coming to an end. The angel adds, “You can depend on that, because God says so; *his* words are powerful and reliable!”¹³

The prophet is then told to go to the top of a high mountain and joyfully, fearlessly, and powerfully proclaim the *good* news – or the glad tidings – saying: “*Here is your God. Look, the LORD is coming as a mighty warrior to deal with his enemies and as a gentle shepherd to leaderless sheep to carry them in his arms and lead them to safety.*”¹⁴ All this is the message of comfort God wants to have communicated with his people through the prophet Isaiah. The question remains, what will their reaction be when they hear that message. We heard a little of that last week.¹⁵

Mark’s Gospel begins with explosive brevity! And clearly this passage from Isaiah was on Mark’s mind because he implies that just as God took the *initiative* in Isaiah’s day, and a new day of hope and peace dawned in troubled times, so God has acted *again* to bring comfort to his people in Mark’s day. God’s new messenger is *Jesus the Messiah*, says Mark, who has brought “glad tidings.”¹⁶ But Mark then backtracks and introduces John the Baptist. Mark, in good Jewish fashion, adapts and reinterprets those verses from Isaiah 40 because he sees them as also applying to God’s new initiative. Mark sees John the Baptist as being, “*the voice of one shouting in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord, making his paths straight.*”¹⁷ All the other gospel writers agree with Mark and make that same connection.¹⁸ The obvious physical link is that John’s ministry was based in the wilderness. But the notion of “wilderness” reminds us of the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness at the time of Moses, and that perhaps reflects the spiritual condition of John’s audience. And the people responded positively to John’s message for, just as in Isaiah’s day, they were spiritually hungry and physically oppressed. John

¹⁰ This may also evoke memories of the King’s highway in Num 20:17; 21:22, or of Babylonian processions.

¹¹ This is more apparent in the LXX, i.e., this is a kind of call-narrative for (2nd) Isaiah, though the *message* is the focus here, rather than the messenger.

¹² Isa 40:6-8 adapted from the *Tanakh*, CJB, NRSV. (I am using “angel” loosely to correspond to the heavenly court image.)

¹³ In 1 Pet 1:23-25, this eternal word of the Lord becomes the Christian gospel.

¹⁴ Isa 40:9-11. God’s victory was through Cyrus of Persia!

¹⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/From-Why-to-Waiting-in-Hope.pdf>.

¹⁶ Mark 1:1. “The gospel of Jesus Christ” could be (from a Greek perspective) translated as *either* “the gospel *which* Jesus brings [or proclaims]” or “the gospel *about* Jesus Christ.” Either is grammatically possible; *both* may be intended! Note that “gospel” means “good news” or “glad tidings” (not a rebuke) and this rhetoric paralleled Greco-Roman heraldic proclamations from, say, Caesar. The shortness of Mark’s introduction is, nevertheless, rich in meaning.

¹⁷ Mark 1:3, citing Isa 40:3. In 1:2, Mark is deliberately combining words from Mal 3:1; Exod 23:20 as an introductory link.

¹⁸ See: John 1:19-28; Luke 3:1-9; Matt 3:1-6. (Luke cites the whole of Isa 40:3-5, which concludes: “*and all humanity will see the salvation of God.*” One of Luke’s themes is Jesus is the savior of the whole world.)

the Baptist obviously wasn't a road-builder, but through his preaching of the need for confession and repentance, the latter being signified in the ritual washing of baptism, he was preparing the Jewish people for what God was going to do next through Jesus - the LORD's Anointed.¹⁹

Mark also mentions that "John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist." This is not a statement that this man had eccentric habits, but rather John wore clothes similar in to Elijah.²⁰ Hence Mark is making a connection between John the Baptist and that Old Testament prophet, and we have to ask ourselves, *why* would he do that? Mark has not only linked John with words from Isaiah, but also words from Malachi.²¹ And that prophet also mentions that an Elijah-figure will come before God comes in judgment.²² What this tells us that a "new" Elijah, a holy prophet of great stature, was anticipated by Jews and was understood to have the role of "preparing the way for the Lord."²³ Curiously, John the Baptist doesn't claim to be that Elijah-figure; in fact, in John's gospel – and that's a *different* "John" - he denies it.²⁴ However, Matthew tells us that Jesus *himself* identifies John the Baptist as that Elijah-figure.²⁵ And Luke has an *angelic* messenger link John with Elijah, so it must be true!²⁶ (I say that facetiously, yet I believe angelic messages reveal crucial, truthful, theological information that we would not be able deduce from reason alone – and that's why we need to take their contents seriously.)

Moving on, I suggest that what we have here is a jigsaw puzzle that is coming together *fast*. I don't know what your experiences of jigsaw puzzles is, but I methodically first find the all edge pieces to define the overall picture. It can look very impressive very quickly. Then you have the grind of building up sections that have the same color or a recognizable image, and that can take some time. But eventually, as the overall picture takes shape, the later pieces all seem to fall into place relatively quickly. That's my experience, anyway. It seems that the gospel writers are seeing, with the benefit of hindsight, that Jesus and John the Baptist are making new sense of certain Old Testament texts. And the gospel writers want their *readers* to see the same connections that they have made with the ongoing story of God's action in history.

In Isaiah 40:6, the angelic figure tells the prophet Isaiah to "*proclaim*" or "*cry out.*" Mark then tells us John the Baptist's message: "He *proclaimed*, "One more powerful than I am is coming after me; I am not worthy to bend down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."²⁷ Now all that sounds mysterious and cryptic. But, like Isaiah, John's message

¹⁹ In Isa 40:3, the road was for the LORD, God himself. Here, John is preparing for the LORD's anointed: Jesus. (Even so, the use of "Lord" (*kyrios*) here is probably a christological hint.)

²⁰ See: 2 Kings 1:8. (Note, according to 2 Kings 2, Elijah did not die but went directly to heaven in a chariot of fire.) The camel's hair is a bit of a mystery, but maybe John was a hairy man or, perhaps, didn't cut his hair – a sign of a Nazarite vow.

²¹ Mal 3:1 – see Mark 1:2. (Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament)

²² Mal 4:5.

²³ Matt 3:3, citing Isa 40:3, and here Matthew cites Mark verbatim; see Mark 1:1-8 (and John 1:19-28).

²⁴ John 1:21-25.

²⁵ Matt 11:11-15 and Mark 1:6; 9:11-13 implies it, which Matthew reiterates and makes explicit in 17:13. Moreover, Matthew repeatedly compares and contrasts John with Jesus: Matt 3:2/4:17; 3:5/4:23; 3:7/23:33.

²⁶ Luke 1:15-17.

²⁷ Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16.

was not pointing to himself but to someone else – one with even *greater* authority than himself.²⁸ Before we can even ask the question, “Who is that person?”, Mark hastily introduces Jesus of Nazareth and John baptizes him. We are told, “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens *splitting apart* and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my one dear Son; in you I take great delight.”²⁹

I am going to go out on a bit of a limb here and say that Mark and the other gospel writers connect John the Baptist’s message with the instructions the angelic being told Isaiah; listen again: “You who bring good news to Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain and lift up your voice with a shout, don’t be afraid to say to all the Jewish towns, *Here is your God!*” And then he adds, “See, the Sovereign LORD . . . tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.”³⁰ I suggest Mark wants his readers to see that parallel connecting “*Here is your God!*” with the voice from heaven, “You are my one dear Son; in you I take great delight.”³¹ Moreover, we recall that in John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.”³² See how the jigsaw pieces are all coming together?

Advent is a time of waiting for the coming of Jesus. The first thing we need to do is “prepare the way of the Lord.” Our lives need to be prepared for the coming of *our* Lord Jesus. That means confession and repentance; we heard about that last week. Secondly, it also means waiting in *hope* and *trust* for the “Glory of the LORD *will* be revealed.”³³ And, thirdly, we wait in *expectation* that our God will act again in our time, as he did in the past. That means seeking and partnering with God in the new things that he wants to see happening among us today, built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. And we wait in *confidence* because, as the angelic messenger said to Isaiah, “the word of our God endures forever.”³⁴

In Isaiah’s day, God took the initiative and rescued the exiles in a most surprising way. The Babylonians empire collapsed to the Persians, and it was their King Cyrus who allowed the captives return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. All the gospel writers proclaim that in their day God *again* acted dramatically - and astonishingly - through John the Baptist and Jesus. One question we all must ask and answer today is, “*Who exactly is this Jesus?*” We are familiar with the birth stories of Jesus from Matthew and Luke, and rightly so because their responses to that question is addressed by the messages of the angels to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. However, the Lectionary this year switches to Mark’s gospel, which doesn’t have a birth story. Mark’s initial response to that question is that Jesus is *the Messiah*, God’s Chosen Son, as revealed at his baptism *and* as the prophet John the Baptist witnessed. We must look, therefore, beyond the baby in the manger to the adult who changed world history. “*Who is this Jesus?*” Let’s allow the voice of the prophets to open our eyes and recognize, “*Here is your God!*” Amen.

²⁸ See also John 1:29-34.

²⁹ Mark 1:10-11.

³⁰ Isa 40:9-11, adapted.

³¹ Mark 1:11; Matt 3:16-17; Luke 3:21-22; (and John 1:29-34). This also needs to be seen in the context of Isa 40:5: “The glory/presence of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

³² John 10:1-21. The image of Jesus as shepherd is suggested in the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7; Matt 18:12-14) and explicit in Matt 25:31-46, where the Son of Man is compared to a shepherd.

³³ Isa 40:5.

³⁴ Isa 40:8; 1 Pet 1:23-25.