

Front Man for Jesus

A sermon on Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8
Presented to the Hodges Presbyterian Church
On 4 December 2011
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Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

- ¹ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
- ² 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.
- ³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall 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 grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
- ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.
- ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.
- ⁹ 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!"
- ¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
- ¹¹ 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 (NRSV)

- ¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;
- ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"
- ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.
- ⁷ 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.

⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The passage from Isaiah is the prolog to a new section of the prophet's book. Many scholars call the portion of the book of Isaiah beginning with chapter 40 and continuing through the end of the book by the name "second" Isaiah, because the theme of the book seems to change at this point.

Before chapter 40, although there are signs of hope scattered through, we find the general message of wrath and judgment. Israel has sinned and turned against God, and God's wrath is shortly to descend upon them in the form of conquest and exile. For 40 chapters, Isaiah waxes eloquent about all the things that the various nations, and especially Israel, have done and just what God is going to do about it. Israel will be conquered; her people will be driven into foreign lands.

But in chapter 40, we see a radical change in the nature of Isaiah's message. Isaiah sees the coming of a new age. Up until chapter 40, Isaiah has spoken mostly about the Assyrians and their conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. His theme has been the need for faith and the folly of trust in the flesh. Beginning with chapter 40, Isaiah turns toward the period of the Babylonian captivity, including the conquest of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but he also begins looking past the captivity to the future for the nation. He looks forward to the coming of the Servant of the Lord who will restore the relationship of God not only to Israel but also to the world as a whole. Isaiah describes the idea of substitutionary atonement for the world's sins through the suffering and death of the Messiah.

The verses we read in chapter 40 are a lead in to this section in much the same way that the description in the passage we read from the Gospel of Mark of the ministry of John the Baptist is a lead in to the ministry of Christ.

This passage in Isaiah is a collection of speeches in four different voices. Picture the scene – a meeting in Yahweh’s court. Different groups are gathered together there. First are the usual attendees of the court of God – the seraphim, the angels and other spirits. There is a solo voice, presumably a member of that company, but speaking alone. Then there are two other groups who represent the people of God. The first represents Israel in captivity while the second represents Jerusalem/Zion after the end of the exile.

Let’s look at the passage again:

First, there is a chorus from the heavenly court:

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

² 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.

This statement offers comfort to Jerusalem, looking to the future when the exile will be ended. Isaiah is writing this in 740 BC, but he sees into the future when Israel will have been through 70 years of conquest and exile that will shake the faith of the Jews and will cause a radical reinterpretation of what it means to be God’s chosen people. They will have to come to grips with the concept that they were being punished for their sins. Here, Isaiah writes the words of the heavenly court that brings assurance of pardon. They have paid for their sins. Their punishment came from God, and they have completed their sentence. God, Himself, is ready to pardon them and forgive their past offenses. A new day is dawning.

This is a prediction of a change in status for Jerusalem. Throughout its Jewish history, Jerusalem had been the military center of the nation. King David had fortified it, and

it had served as military headquarters for countless wars and battles. Now, the heavenly chorus is saying, her time of warfare is ended, and Jerusalem can finally begin to fulfill her new role in God's plans. It may become a place that truly fits its Hebrew name, because the Hebrew meaning of the word "Jerusalem" means "place of peace." In the Lord's plans, Jerusalem is to truly be the place where peace comes to the world. (Not yet, but we have faith that some day it will happen.)

Verse 3 begins with a second voice:

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

⁴ 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.

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

This solo voice from the midst of the heavenly court cries out for preparation. Israel is to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Tremendous acts are called for. Leveling rough ground is bad enough, but even worse is raising valleys and lowering mountains!

Tremendous amounts of preparation are required. A highway is to be built through the desert.

And who is going to use the highway? We might think that Isaiah is talking about building a highway to hasten the return of the captives who were transported off to Babylon, but the highway called for in this passage is through the desert – from the area to the southeast of the city. If it were from the north, it might be for the exiles in Babylon to return, and if it were from the south, it might be for the refugees who fled to Egypt, but this is from the southeast. The prophet Ezekiel had pictured Yahweh abandoning the city in that direction. Now, Isaiah says He is to return.

Then a new voice begins to speak:

⁶ 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.

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

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Then the voice commands "Cry out," and the people from Israel answer pretty much the way you and I would answer, too. "What am I supposed to say?"

Then a skeptical voice interjects. You've all heard the quote "all flesh is grass." The voice is saying that no one can remain faithful for very long. We all fade away like withering flowers, and we cannot withstand the will of God. The word translated breath here also can be translated spirit. When humans are faced with the Spirit of God, we can't prevail. This is a bitter reminder to the people of Israel that everything that they have been through – the captivity and exile, the warfare, all their hardships, were ordained directly by God. Their commitment to Him lagged and finally failed altogether. It implies that because one is unable to stand against God one also cannot or should not be asked to stand with God. Nothing human persists. It all fades away. Only the word of God stands forever.

Then the prophet receives instructions

⁹ 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!"

The word of God is eternal, and the call to prepare comes from the word of God. God's promise will be fulfilled. He will come to Israel. There is a question in the translation of the Hebrew that makes up this verse. The meaning in the Hebrew has been taken by some translators (like the people who created the New International Version) to mean that the messenger is speaking *to* Jerusalem and Zion. The Hebrew, however, can be read more

properly in this passage to imply that the messenger is the people of Zion/Jerusalem themselves. Rather than a messenger being sent to tell Jerusalem that God is coming, Jerusalem is being directed to tell the world that God is coming.

Zion is to proclaim to the world:

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

¹¹ 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.

Just as the punishment for their sins came to Israel from the Lord, so also does their salvation and forgiveness and pardon. The Lord will return and care for Zion. He will be their shepherd, guarding and protecting them in love.

This ties in nicely with our New Testament passage from Mark.

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

The NRSV correctly translates the Greek word that can also be translated “gospel.” The word “gospel” derives from the old English "godspel" ("good news") and translates the Greek *euangelion*. The Greek word originally meant the reward for bringing good news but later came to mean the Good News itself. In particular, it was often used with the connotation of news of victory in battle that would be brought from the front lines of the war back to the home country. In the NT the Good News is that Jesus Christ has won the victory over sin and death and the devil – that God has provided salvation for all men through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mark is tying the beginning of this Good News to the appearance on the scene of John the Baptist. He directly references the Scripture passage from Isaiah that we have just been discussing:

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;
³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

There has been a subtle shift in the translation here. Did you hear it? Previously, the translation was "a voice crying **pause** 'in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.'" While now, in Mark, the voice that is crying is itself in the wilderness. Partly, this may have to do with the manner in which the Scripture texts were written down and transmitted to future generations. The texts were originally generally written in a style that omitted punctuation, spaces between words, and in many manuscripts, vowels altogether. This made division into words and understanding of things like punctuation and quotation delimitation difficult at times. Occasionally, a phrase could carry different meanings based on how the words were divided. This is one of those cases.

But no matter how you read it, the meaning is not changed so much that we can't derive the same message. God is coming! Get ready!

In Isaiah, God was to return to Israel. Israel was to get ready and prepare the way for Him to arrive. Here we see the same message being proclaimed by John. John the Baptist was that person who took the command in Isaiah that we said was a command to Zion to proclaim the good news, and he put it into practice.

Here, as Mark says, we see the very beginning of the proclamation of the gospel. Prepare the way of the Lord.

This week, we're in the second week of Advent. The whole of Advent is a time in the Christian year to celebrate the coming of the Lord into the world in human form. Some of you have asked why we don't sing Christmas carols last week or this week. The reason is simple. Advent is a season of its own with its own focus on the coming of Christ.

It doesn't focus on his birth as a baby so much as it focuses on the beginning of his ministry and even more on his eventual return in glory. We remember the time when the Lord of heaven and earth will again soon be among us. And we are commanded like the Jews in Isaiah's prophecy, to prepare the way. The hymns of Advent express that waiting and watching and longing in ways that the Christmas carols never could. If we rush past Advent in our hurry to get to Christmas, we miss the message of Advent – Christ is coming again, and we need to be prepared for his return.

And how do we get ready for that return? How do we prepare for the coming of the Lord?

The voice in Isaiah's prophecy commands us to level the rough ground and lower the mountains and raise the valleys. John the Baptist had another method to prepare:

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John called the people, and us, to prepare the way for God to come, not physically into the city, but spiritually into our lives, and sometimes, I think the way that Isaiah wrote about was easier! All we have to do according to Isaiah is to move mountains. If we listen to John, we have to repent of our sins.

Repent – the Greek word μετανοία – means more than just being sorry for what we did. Repentance - μετανοία – implies a change of mind – a turning away – a forsaking of the sinful practice. It implies a resolve to strive for a future life in which the sins of the past are practiced no more. I don't know about you folks, but for me, moving mountains is easy compared to that!

John came as a witness. He came to present a message, and to drum up interest – to be a front man for the “big show.” I don't know if it's still this way – I may be

in the last generation that has this experience, but when I was a kid, every year, there was a circus that came to town. A couple of weeks before the circus came, a fellow they called a “front man” would come to town and go up and down the streets in the downtown area and put up signs in the shop windows advertising the circus. Then, a week or so later, people would start handing out circulars on the street corners. Sometimes, the people handing out the circulars would put on a show for the crowds. Sometimes they dressed up like clowns or did magic tricks. The idea was to draw attention, and they did a good job of it! The expectation would build among us kids, until we could hardly wait. We knew that soon, the promised circus would be here, and all because the front man had done his work and got the word to everyone in town to be ready for the circus.

That was the kind of job that John the Baptist had. Instead of the front man for a circus, he was the front man for Jesus. It was his job to let all of Judea know that, not the circus, but God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, was coming.

He really got their attention. Scripture says that:

⁵ 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.

⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

John, probably purposely, adopted mannerisms that made him stand out from the crowd. He dressed funny. He didn't eat like anyone else. He drew crowds of curiosity seekers, and established himself as a prophet. He really got their attention.

The pattern of Jewish society recognized certain figures throughout their history as prophets. Prophets were people who brought the word of God to the nation. The prophet in Israel could be anyone at all. Prophets had come from the ranks of priests, but they had also been shepherds, a dresser of sycamore trees, and any of a number of other

professions. Then, they stopped appearing at all. At the time when John appeared on the scene, the Jews had been living for about 400 years without anyone being recognized as a prophet. Some of the Jewish scholars believed that prophecy had even stopped. Then John came along, and a prophetic voice was heard in Israel again for the first time in four centuries.

And, recognizing that John was a prophet, the people responded in faith to his words. They confessed their sins and accepted baptism as a sign of repentance. They had heard and believed his message:

⁷ 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.

⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

So there you see his role. John wasn't the "big show." Even though his was the first prophetic voice in 400 years, he was there only to let people know about the real coming attraction. John took Isaiah's words to cry out to the people "prepare the way of the Lord," and made them his way of life.

And what about us?

John was the first witness to the coming of Christ. With John, the beginnings of the Gospel, the good news, shone forth. He obeyed the words he read in Isaiah, but we have other words that we must obey. We have the words of Christ Himself that say in Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."

We, each and every one of us, have been given essentially the same command that John the Baptist followed. We are commanded to spread the Gospel, the good news, to all creation. How well do we do?

According to nationwide surveys conducted by the Barna Research Group,

- Almost 9 out of 10 Americans (86%) cannot accurately define the meaning of the “Great Commission.”
- 7 out of 10 adults, national televised football notwithstanding, have no clue what “John 3:16” means
- Barely one third of all adults (31%) know the meaning of the expression “the gospel.”
- Only about half (53%) of born again Christians feel a responsibility to tell others about their faith. In other words, nearly half of them do not think it is their personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs with those who don’t know Christ.

And what does it mean to the world if we don’t share our faith?

Consider this scenario. You’re walking down the street late one night and you look over at a house on the corner. You see the cars of the family are all parked in the driveway, but there are no lights on. You figure that the family must already be in bed asleep. Suddenly you notice thick black smoke coming from the kitchen window. The house is on fire! What do you do? If you don’t do anything, the house could burn down and the whole family will burn to death in their sleep. Is there any one of us who would hesitate to go up to the house and wake the family and get them to come out to safety?

Now, if we would go out of our way to save our neighbors from physical death, how can we do any less to save our neighbors from the fire of hell - the spiritual death of not knowing Jesus Christ?

Charles Peace was a condemned criminal on death row here in the United States. As is the practice here, a clergyman led the condemned man to his execution. As he was going, this minister, an Episcopal priest, read the Prayer Book liturgy, and as he was reciting it word for word he mentioned “hell.” Charles Peace tapped him on the shoulder and said: “Sir, do you mind me asking a question? Do you believe what you're reading?” The minister said: “Of course I believe what I'm reading.” The condemned man said: “I don’t,

but if I believed what you believe, I would crawl on my hands and knees to the four corners of the world across broken glass to warn people of such an eternity.”

Our mission is the same as John the Baptist’s. We are called to spread the good news of the coming of the Lord. And when the Lord comes, He brings with Him a salvation from our sins that leads to reconciliation with God – a removal of the wedge that our sins have driven between God and us.

Some of you know that I’m involved with the Child Evangelism Fellowship afterschool program at Hodges Elementary. In that program, they have a very simple yet theologically sound definition of sin. We teach the children that sin is anything we think, say or do that makes God unhappy and that separates us from God. Jesus removes our sin and brings reconciliation. And, with that reconciliation, comes the peace that is the meaning of this week’s candle in our Advent wreath: a peace in one’s soul that comes from a right relationship with God.

Let us pray: Lord God, You and You alone are the author of peace. From You and You alone comes the forgiveness of our sins that allows us to find your peace in our soul. You have commanded us to spread the good news of Christ to all creation, and in these troubled times, even more today than in the past, we realize that everyone in the world desperately needs your peace. Empower us. Inspire us. Energize us, we pray, to go from here into all the world and, like John the Baptist, speak Your words – tell of the coming of the only hope for the troubled world - Your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for whose sake and in whose name we pray. Amen.