

Rescue Accessible    2020  
Isaiah 40:1-5, 11        Mark 1:1-8

Isaiah 40:1-5, 11 (New Revised Standard Version)

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." 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 (New Revised Standard Version)

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."

I know that for many of our church family and faith community  
the past few weeks and months have been especially difficult.  
From our conversations, extended isolation during Covid-19 lockdown  
has meant long days of feeling lonely, fearful, useless & anxious,  
**for we need human-connections to support, sustain & encourage us.**

Due to the extraordinary efforts and creativity of their teachers,  
most students are managing to adjust and to learn online,  
yet others are struggling, feeling lost and overwhelmed,  
falling further behind and slipping through the cracks.

For those missing a deceased loved one or worried about someone dear,  
this season can feel wrong & hopeless, painfully difficult & sad,  
with no sense of relief in sight or better-easier days ahead.

It reminds me of serving as a chaplain at a VA hospital in Richmond,  
where I was assigned to the spinal cord trauma and injury unit.  
**It was a hard & difficult place**, filled with young service men & women  
struggling to manage their lives as paraplegics and quadriplegics.  
Yet despite their many physical limitations,  
most were living well-connected & meaningful lives.  
**Yes, God was very present even amid all that struggle and suffering.**

I was called in when a new patient arrived, a young injured sailor,

who was driving back from a big party with some of his shipmates.

He'd been drinking, & there was a terrible & deadly car accident. One had been killed instantly, & he was paralyzed from the neck down, which meant that he'd spend the rest of his life in that trauma unit.

His body had been crushed and horribly mangled beyond recovery, but **far worse than his broken neck and paralyzed body, was his crushed & broken spirit that would not be consoled.**

He was despondent with a terrible sense of guilt and tragic loss.

He was also so bitter and angry, so depressed and uncooperative that the doctors and nurses could do very little to help him.

His medical team asked me to help him **want to live.**

But never before or since have I seen such abject bitterness & grief or the agony of such absolute hopelessness and total brokenness.

'**Brokenness**', is a word that does not appear in most dictionaries, but is a theological term about suffering **as a human condition.**

**We live far less** than the rich meaningful and purposeful lives, the full blessings that our God and loving Creator intends for us.

**We bear wounds & scars**, damaged by harsh realities & losses in life, by defeats, disappointments and pain that seem beyond endurance. **No, none of us are strangers to the concept and reality of brokenness.**

When the nation of Israel was utterly defeated and destroyed, and forced into exile and to live as captives in distant Babylon, **they were broken and crushed into absolute hopelessness**, and felt abandoned by God, lost in ways that nothing could ever fix.

So imagine the shock of hearing the prophet's proclamation, vs. 1-2

*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.*

In Hebrew, the word, *Comfort* literally describes a situation of someone completely out of breath, totally exhausted and panting, but then someone arrives who supports and strengthens them by holding them up, sustaining to catch their failing breath.

**What a wonderful word-picture of grace.**

The next phrase *received... double for all her sins* is a somewhat misleading translation, for it does not mean, "Israel has suffered double the amount for all her sins."

But rather, the word, *double* describes a business transaction.

In the ancient world, when someone couldn't repay a debt they owed, they could be forced into slavery until they worked off their debt, and the debt-amount was specified on paper, nailed to a doorpost.

And if someone paid off the debt, **redeeming them from slavery**,  
then a second piece of paper would be nailed over the first,  
indicating that the debt had been paid, it had been doubled.

In Hebrew doubled refers to that second paper covering the first,  
as public witness and testimony that the debt had been fully paid.

So, to the struggling, suffering and broken Israelites in Babylon,  
Isaiah's proclamation is about divine mercy and restoration,  
that **God will "double"**, or **pay-off their indebtedness of sin**.

Far from rejection, God's promising grace, redemption & restoration,  
so clear a path and make a highway for hope through the wilderness,  
because the people are coming back home to the Promised land,  
an end to suffering, exile & captivity in Babylon... vs. 3-4, 11

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. ... 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.

**That's another picture of grace, God's steadfast love in action.**

Through Isaiah, God is promising these broken – discouraged people:  
there is no valley deep enough, there is no mountain high enough,  
there is no wilderness so remote or desert inhospitable enough,  
**to keep God from coming to redeem and restore you,  
and bring to you hope for rescue and salvation.**

God will guide them along their journey home through the wilderness  
like a shepherd carrying them in his mighty arms,  
a powerful and unrelenting love that will not let go.

That voice in the wilderness was a call for the people to get ready,  
and don't let anything get in the way or interfere,  
**so to make way to receive God's blessing, healing and grace.**

The Gospel of Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist.  
He is the one sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord,  
which was recognized as fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy, v s. 2-3.

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,'"

That is a promise, hope and gift that we need to hear and to heed.  
It is also a call for us to reflect on the way we're living,  
our values, our priorities, our behavior, the words we speak,  
our relationships, our attitude, our faith and walk with God...

... and deal with any obstacles, with all that stands in the way,  
anything that hinders a life faithful to the Lord our God.

**If we're not headed toward God and more meaningful discipleship,**

**then repent, turn around toward God's grace and respond,  
and don't keep going further away from where we want to end up...**

... it's turning to receive the blessings God intends for us,  
**and living out an appropriate and faithful response  
to God's wonderful gift of grace, compassion and love.**

Today with our focus on peace on this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent,  
the point is to consider what we are doing with our days.  
The point of Advent, is to examine our lives honestly and critically,  
and thereby prepare us for Christmas, for the coming of Jesus,  
**so to be more capable of receiving God's promised blessings.**

The message of these passages is something like when I was Boy Scout.  
Our troop did a service project in New Hampshire each year,  
by clearing the fire road that went deep into the forest,  
against the slow creep of brush & overgrowing vegetation,  
and the gradual erosion and washing away of the roadway.

Every Spring we would inspect and try to improve the fire road,  
just as every Advent, we self-inspect and try to improve our faith.

We'd cut and remove fallen logs, clear away brush and limbs,  
and we filled in potholes, eroded and washed-out places  
so large equipment trucks could get through more easily.  
We cleared and prepared a roadway into the forest,  
so that help could get through, making it **rescue accessible.**

### **Do you see and recognize the connection with Advent?**

That process of clearing the forest roadway in New Hampshire  
provides a clue for improving our lives this Advent season,  
toward the peace with God and neighbor that the Lord intends.

Like the vegetation along a fire-road into the forest,  
distractions & fear can grow and crowd-out trust, hope & peace.

Our walk with God, our spiritual life and discipleship can erode  
if we slip away from regular prayer and devotional study,  
or if it becomes a rote task that doesn't feed our souls,  
or if we don't find ways to connect & care for others.

### **The message is, your God loves you, and is coming to heal & rescue you.**

That's the shepherd-thing about arms of grace to hold & nurture,  
that seeks the lost, heals the discouraged, hurting & broken.

### **The question is, what are the obstacles that stand in the way?**

What all are we allowing to pollute and grow in our lives?  
And are some of the choices we've made, ones we need to reconsider? ...  
**... so that we are more grace and rescue accessible.**

Amid our situation today, our struggles, our losses and challenges,  
hear God promises given through the prophets Isaiah and Micah,

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God ... In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd ... And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; **and he shall be the one of peace.**

As we share Communion at the Lord's Table of grace and love,  
some of us here in the sanctuary and some later on by video,  
this is an ideal opportunity for us to examine ourselves,  
our lives, our attitudes, our values and hopes,  
and especially, our current life-walk with God...

...for here by the grace, power, peace and presence of the Spirit,  
**we can fall in love with our Lord all over again  
and stand firm in the promises and peace of God.**