

## **Advent 2 B 2020**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

This summer, I decided to preach a series of four sermons to instill courage and hope in the midst of the pandemic. The pandemic, plus the climate and weather catastrophes that were taking place. Including our local heat wave and drought. Along with the protests against racism and police brutality. The general sense of despair and fear that engulfed us, and engulfs us still.

I knew that the scripture readings assigned by our lectionary did not speak to the moment. So when I looked to the Bible— all 67 books, all 1,189 chapters— I found the most suitable chapter to be Isaiah chapter 40. The first eleven verses of that chapter constitute our first reading this morning.

And that's because Isaiah chapter 40 is a turning point in the book of Isaiah. It is words addressed to an audience about 200 years later than the earlier chapters. A huge change for the people of Israel. Who were a proud kingdom but in Isaiah 40 have been turned into exiles, into refugees. The first part of Isaiah is mostly words of reprimand and correction to an arrogant and foolish people who have become untethered from God. But when we turn the page to Isaiah 40, Babylon has conquered the nation, destroyed the city and the temple, and carted away the citizens into slavery. And so the message of God pivots from a message of condemnation to a message of hope. "*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*" It is a pivot that Martin Luther and Lutherans refer to as Law and Gospel. Law is God speaking to us in judgment. Gospel is God speaking to us in mercy. It would be a great mistake, Lutherans believe, to presume that the Old Testament is a book of judgment and rules, and that the New Testament is a book of love and mercy. On the contrary, Lutherans say, both are found in the Old and New Testaments. Law and Gospel are the twin rails of the whole Bible. And perhaps never as spectacularly as in Isaiah.

And so, back in August, in our long, hot, angry summer of disease, [I took us back](#) to this moment in the Bible. With words from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* And I repeated the words of the psalm that was written at that moment in history: *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.* [Psalm 137:1-2] The Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem was a great tragedy, one of the defining events of Judaism, a trauma so deep and lasting that six hundred years later the Christian book of Revelation would turn to Babylon as the ultimate symbol of the threats against the people of

God.

The significant thing about the fortieth chapter of Isaiah is that Christians very early on connected it to the dawn of the Messiah, to the coming of Jesus. It's spectacularly clear in the gospel according Mark, who is our guide to the church year that we've just begun. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah...* The good news begins with Isaiah 40. Of all the gospels, Mark has no interest in the birth of Jesus. Not Bethlehem, not ancestry, not virginal conceptions. There is no Christmas in Mark. Jesus comes onto the stage as an adult.

There is no Christmas in Mark. But there is Advent. John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness. In the first four verses. The beginning of the good news. Isaiah chapter 40. John the Baptizer appeared. As though John springs forth from the prophets. As though John is indeed Isaiah chapter 40, in the wilderness, preparing for what God is going to do.

*Luke's gospel does* have Christmas. The birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. But first, Luke has to write the longest chapter in the New Testament. Luke chapter one. The birth of John the Baptist must precede the birth of Jesus. Even Mary's song—the Magnificat—is triggered by John the Baptist leaping for joy in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. John must precede Jesus. (And it takes the longest chapter in the New Testament to make that happen before Jesus can be born in chapter two.) Because John is the Old Testament. And John is the prophets. And John is Isaiah chapter forty. That connection is explicitly made in all four gospels— Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (the other John, the apostle). They all cite today's first reading as essential to understanding John the Baptist, and therefore as essential to understanding the origins of Jesus.

What that tells us is that the birth of Jesus is the pivot point. The point where God is stirring up his power to come and deliver his people. And so there is hope for people who have lost hope. *By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down – and there we wept.* For those who have despaired, for those whom the darkness surrounds. God is coming.

And now, perhaps for the first time, you can understand the somber words of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel. O come, o come Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here.* Israel is captive. Captive in Babylon. Captive and exiled. And mourning over what it has lost. *“That mourns in lonely exile here.” By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down – and there we wept.* All of this is contained in Isaiah chapter 40. *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* Those are words for the lonely exiles. Mourning their losses. *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.* Those are not just abstract descriptions of a shepherd. Those are words proclaimed to people who are in exile. Who are in mourning.

Certainly, this ought to mean something to you and to me. We, who are very exiled. Very isolated from our loved ones. Cut off from the normal rhythms and connections of society. Mourning what we have lost, and mourning the losses ahead of us. For most of us, Thanksgiving was not what it ought to be. And Christmas will not be that, either. God is good. And he is with us. But we've lost a great deal. We are all hurting, we are all somewhat damaged. Healing will come, eventually. And I look forward to that. But the word of Advent is hope. Comfort, o comfort my people. Tender words. From a God who sees us, Who comes to help us. Amen.