

December 10, 2023 Rev Beth Orling

Advent 2B. December 10, 2023.

Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8.

Isaiah 40

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak 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.

³A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴Every 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.

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

⁶A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

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

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

⁹Get 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!’
¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
¹¹He 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.

The Gospel

Mark 1

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

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

The Sermon

My granddaughter Katherine gave me a mug a few years ago. It has become my favorite, but I only use it in December. It says, “All hearts come home for Christmas.”

A favorite Christmas song goes, “I’ll be home for Christmas, you can count on me,” but goes on, “if only in my dreams.” That one always makes me cry a little bit.

What is home? It's not a house. It's not a building.

We don't call our Monday guests "homeless" or even "unhoused." If we need a descriptor, we might say "people without addresses." Every single one of us carries our spiritual home within us.

At this time of year, we hope to be settled in our houses – and in our spiritual homes. Animals seek winter homes. Bees retreat to hives for the duration, fanning their shivering wings to warm the queen. Chipmunks find underground burrows so they don't freeze. A mother bear makes a temporary home and curls up for months in the darkness of a den that fits her.

Isaiah, the Hebrew prophet whose words we heard this morning, tuned in to his people's yearnings for home. They lived in exile in Babylon – not really home. But most of them had never known Jerusalem – their ancestral home either. Isaiah hears a voice, "Cry out!" and asks, "What shall I cry? What shall I preach?" (The anxious words that every preacher asks him or herself each week!)

Instead of preaching "homecoming" which was on his people's minds, he preaches human mortality, our "grass-like fate." He compares that with divine faithful permanence and divine shepherding: feeding, gathering, carrying. And thus he expresses a more profound hope of people who feel homeless or motherless.

The profound hopes of Isaiah and his flock are echoed in the words the Gospel-writer Mark places in the mouth of John. John was the messenger who thrived in the wilderness, the forerunner, the preparer, the baptizer, the cousin of Jesus. He surely also asked himself as Isaiah did, "What shall I cry? What shall I preach?"

The words he preached were *repent – confess – be forgiven*.

For those of us who worry about our mistakes and short-comings, hear those words: *repent – confess – be forgiven*.

For those of us who worry and are anxious about what we feel we cannot control, hear the voice of the psalm-writer. "God speaks peace to God's faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to God." (Ps. 85:8) Be carried through anxious days as a lamb carried by a good shepherd, a shepherd who gently leads those who are with young. Sleep the sound sleep of the mother bear who lies safely in her tiny den.

In a world that feels very dark, we long for what the psalm-writer desired: mercy, truth, righteousness and peace. These are the gifts Isaiah and John longed for and which Jesus gave us. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who feeds his flock each week with Word and Holy Communion. And as John foretold, “he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” What gifts come from that Spirit!!

The Spirit’s gifts can turn your heart so you can go home for Christmas,
whether you have a house or not,
whether you have a family or not,
whether you have a trip to loved ones or not,
whether you have a fair share of worldly goods or not.
whether you agonize with the Palestinian doctor in Berlin whose family is on the
road somewhere in Gaza,
or worry with the NJ woman whose grandson is a rabbi in Jerusalem.

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While the mother bear sleeps through the dark winter, cubs grow inside her. New life will wake up – mother and cubs – when light returns in the Spring.

We hear with faith the words “Comfort, comfort” in the darkest days of the year. We know dawn is not far away, because we have learned that even when our power is out and our candles have burned down, the sun will again shine into our windows – and into our hearts.

So we cherish the darkness as we wait for the light, Christ our light. Emmanuel: God with us, God present in each moment. Darkness and light are both the same to God, and there we find our home.

One of my favorite Advent hymn verses reads,
“Longing for light we wait in darkness,
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
Light for the world to see.
Christ be our light, shine in our hearts,
Shine through the darkness.
Christ be our light, shine upon us gathered today.” Amen.

(Bernadette Farrell, 1993. OCP Publications, Portland OR)

