

"John"

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

6 December 2008

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

Isaiah 40:1-11

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."

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. The 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 forever.

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

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,

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“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.”

Prayer.

The prophet Isaiah today speaks gently to a broken people.
 The people were refugees, homeless, imprisoned and exiled into a foreign land.
 Misery and human suffering could not be worse.
 The exiled Hebrews were being punished for their idolatry and constant practice of putting their ultimate trust in that which is not the Lord.
 Idolatry causes all sorts of pain and suffering.
 Idolatry causes a rupture between God and God’s people.
 In spite of this, Isaiah reminds us,
 The Lord continues to be the God who speaks and acts.
 The Lord’s power is both vastly unimaginable and is revealed in care and tenderness.¹

God speaks and acts.

God sends John.

John is sent as a messenger,

To soften up the world; to prepare the world, for the coming of the Lord.

As Isaiah says, he’s come to

“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.”²

John comes to do more than rearrange the furniture.

He comes to change the landscape.

The old school way of getting things done will pass away.

The old barriers to change will crumble.

The only ones who have a reason to fear are the “good old boys;”

Those who are so invested in yesterday, and in preserving their own self-interest;

They’re the ones who will become the victims of mountains being leveled and valleys being filled.

And as far as I’m concerned, let the bulldozers begin.

John wasn’t a hippy, tree hugger, or draft dodger.

Neither was he an evangelical, neo-con, or member of the social elite.

He was God’s change agent.

Sent to kick in doors and take no prisoners.

¹ Samuel Giere, Professor of Homeletics, Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, IA

² Isaiah 40:3-5 (NRSV)

There is
 no time to negotiate;
 no time for therapy;
 no time to shift public opinion.
 The glory of the Lord is being revealed.
 And God's work better get done.

If ever there is a sense of urgency, it is today.
 There are only so many days left in Advent.
 Instead of God simply calling John,
 Today's gospel should be seen as God calling all his followers;
 Every disciple;
 Every Christian;
 To be the John the Baptist in our world today.
 We are being called to nothing less than a wholesale change to the hearts and
 minds of every person on our planet.

This is what levels mountains:

Changing hearts and minds from being fixated on guns and bombs, killing and
 violence, power and authority.

This is what fills valleys:

Overturing hearts and minds from being filled with ideological garbage,
 religious fundamentalism, and spoon-fed hatred and ignorance.

This is what makes rough places plane:

Respecting every individual as the personal creative work of God.

Feeding every hungry mouth.

Healing every broken body.

Raising up every ignorant mind.

Living peacefully, and without threats or intimidation.

Extending the love of God in everything we think, say, and do.

The skeptic might say, John didn't change his world.
 To which I say, we're still talking about it today, aren't we?
 The doubter might say, who are we to speak?
 To which I say, God gives us this authority.
 What can we do?
 We can each
 Pray globally
 And act locally.

Pray for the Obamas, Putins, and Jintaos
 - the leaders of our country, Russia, and China -
 of this world.

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Pray that warships will be replaced by ships that transport grain and food,
 Schools and hospitals will be built in place of fortresses or camps,
 Clean water and clear skies will be established and preserved where ever
 humankind has a footprint.

Pray for the terrorists of this world.

Pray that their minds and hearts might be warmed,
 And that the roots causes of terrorism might be reversed, and never visited again.
 Pray that swords will be broken, re-forged, and remade into pruning hooks.

But we also need to get off our knees and get out of our churches.

There is a time and season for prayer.

But there is also a time and season for action.

Leave a can of food or a dollar bill at this altar for the Food Pantry and you're razing
 mountains.

Put mittens, scarves, and hats on the Camron Tree in the side room and you're
 filling a valley.

Bring back your Star gifts and you're making the rough places plane.

Sew those quilts, get out and visit the widows and prisoners, volunteer your time to
 improve the life of another;

Get out and do something

That prepares the way for the Lord to come.

We don't have to be the Lord,

We simply need to prepare for Him to come.

The need has never been greater.

The urgency has never been more intense.

Last month over a half-million American workers lost their jobs.

Who knows how many world-wide?

This month, Christ is coming.

Last week the streets of Mumbai were turned into killing fields.

In two weeks time, salvation will come.

Today's leaves will fall, the snow is flying;

Tomorrow spring will break forth,

The shoot from the stump of Jesse will grow and green.

This is a picture of an all-encompassing brokenness in heaven and on earth;
 A rupture between God and God's people.

Just because the word of John may be old and familiar

Doesn't mean we should act as if eternity isn't hanging by a thread:

It is!

It is up to us to be the John the Baptist of our day,

Such that when that day comes

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We will be held accountable
For what we've accomplished
And the Lord can begin anew
To heal the broken
And repair God and God's people.
Be the change!
Be the change God seeks to make,
Dear brothers and sisters of Christ.
Be the change that makes a highway for our God.
Amen.