

***Do You Hear What I Hear?***

Isaiah 40:1-11

New Testament: Mark 1:1-8

Rev. Stephen Wilkins

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

December 7, 2008

A mother was bringing her child to church one Sunday, and the mother told the daughter, "Now, when the preacher is speaking, you have to listen carefully, because there's no rewind button to go back and re-hear what he said." After a pause, the daughter looked up at her mother and said, "Is there a fast forward button?"

---

I know there are Sundays when you wish there were a fast-forward button on the sermon, and who knows, today may even be one of those Sundays. You can look all you want, but there's no button there. There is, however, somewhat of a rewind button. You see, the text that we just read from the gospel according to Mark is quoting this next text from Isaiah. And so, as we open up to the Isaiah passage, we rewind some 600+ years before the Mark text, to the time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon.

Those were dark days for the people of Israel. Because of their persistent disobedience to God, because of their persistence in ignoring the warnings of the prophets, because of their persistence in chasing after the gods of other peoples, the Israelites were methodically taken away from their homeland. First came the Assyrian armies to carry the northern kingdom off into exile in the year 711 B.C. Then came the Babylonians against the southern kingdom. In 586 B.C., Jerusalem fell, the temple was destroyed, and the people were removed to Babylon, where they spent 70 years in exile. The exile was a period of great lamentation. The people felt the excruciating silence of God as they wept for their homeland.

At some point most of us experience some sort of exile in our own lives: times when you feel alienated, isolated, alone, maybe even abandoned by God. I mention this because it is into the bleak and desolate existence of exile that God breaks his silence and sends his people a word. Hear now that very word of God as it comes to us, even as it came to the people of Israel, in the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, beginning to read in the first verse...

(Read Isaiah 40:1-11)

One of the things I notice in the reading of this passage is the preponderance of verbs that relate to the spoken word. God speaks to us. God sends his herald of good tidings to announce something incredible. God sends his messengers to proclaim a vital word to us. With many voices that ultimately emanate from the mouth of God, God is trying to tell us something grand, a message that is meant not only for the season of Advent, but for all seasons.

Listen to the voices... God is telling us something. What do you hear? Do you hear what I hear?

The first thing I hear is a word of comfort. It's pretty hard to miss that one, isn't it? "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term..."

It says something about the character and the heart of God that the first word that comes to a people in exile is not a word of condemnation, not a harsh word for their mistreatment of the poor, the homeless, the lonely; but a

word of comfort. It is a word of encouragement. It is a word of redemption. It says something about the magnitude of God's love for us that a people who thought themselves abandoned by God now hear God referring to them as "my people." When a person is in exile, it is a great word of comfort that says, your exile is ended, it is finished.

Comfort, comfort my people... Speak tenderly to them and cry to them that there is an end to the exile, there is redemption. It is the Advent declaration that evil and sorrow and suffering do not have the upper hand, indeed that evil and sorrow and suffering do not have the final word. It is God who has the final word, and his word is comfort, redemption.

Listen to the voices... God is telling us something. What do you hear? Do you hear what I hear?

The first voice is the comforting declaration of redemption. The next voice is one that calls for us to prepare. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...'" There are a couple of things I want to say about this portion of the Isaiah text. For one thing, the road, the highway of our God, is being prepared in the wilderness. What that means is that God doesn't wait for us to leave the wilderness before he comes to us. No, God comes to us where we are, as we are. God doesn't call out from afar and say, "Come to me if you can." God comes to meet us in the wilderness of our lives, and he says, I will be with you. At Advent we remember that it is God's initiative; God is the one who first comes to us, not vice-versa.

But if it is God who comes to meet us, the implication of the command to prepare is that it is up to us to clear away the hindrances to his coming. It's not God who puts up the obstacles that interfere with our relationship with God; it's us. We're the ones who are too busy to make room for God day in, day out. It's not God who clutters our hearts with distractions that lead us out of his presence; we are the ones who create clutter in our hearts.

Of all the things we preach during Advent, the call to prepare our hearts is the one I have the most difficulty preaching. I don't have trouble with the theology. I have trouble applying it to my life, especially during this time of year. As much as the next person, I find myself busy with the Christmastime frenzy from when I wake up in the morning until my head hits the pillow at night. Only, my busy-ness has had little to do with the real reason for the season. I find myself attending to Christmas details without attending to the most important detail of all, the meaning of the birth of our Savior.

Do you hear the voice that says, "Prepare the way of the Lord...?"

Listen with me. Listen to the voices. God is telling us something. What do you hear? Do you hear what I hear?

I hear a voice that says, "The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever." It is the voice that says our hope is not in vain, for the basis of our hope is in the true and certain word of God.

Since September of 2001, we have come to the realization that even the greatest monuments built by human hands are apt to disappear in the blinking of an eye. We have come to recognize that human glory is fleeting at best, and is nothing on which to bet one's life. Even the best that we can come up with is tainted by sin and subject to corruption, decay, and will ultimately meet the same fate as that of the grass and the flower of the field.

We are transitory. That is an indisputable fact of life. And if our hope is pinned on human agencies, human agendas, human plans, then our hope itself is in vain, and the things at which we grasp for meaning will evaporate before our very eyes.

But at Advent we are reminded that our hope is not pinned on anything human. Our hope is in the everlasting and trustworthy promises of the living God. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever.

You see, at Advent we are reminded that reconciliation is possible. At Advent we are reminded that redemption is more than a fantasy. We are reminded that these things are true, not because of anything that we have done, or because of how great the human race has become, but because of the faithfulness of God. Without the faithfulness of God, and without the promises God has given us, we would have no hope.

Listen with me. Listen to the voices. God is telling us something. What do you hear? Do you hear what I hear?

Do you hear the voice that says, “Here is your God: a God who is strong and mighty, yet gentle as a loving shepherd”? He is a God who rules with all authority, yet who gently holds in his arms those who are too weak to continue on their own. He is a God who by every definition should demand tribute from his subjects and conscript us all into lifelong servitude, yet it is God who chooses to feed us as the sheep of his flock and care for us out of his benevolent will.

There’s an interesting dynamic that takes place as the passage winds down. In the first two verses of this 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, God’s message is directed to the people of Jerusalem. It is God who speaks his word of comfort and redemption to his people. Now, at the end of this passage, the message is going out from Jerusalem, to people elsewhere. That’s one of the basic movements of the gospel. We receive the good news, but it doesn’t stop with us. The good news we receive is given to us and for us, but it is also given so that we might pass it on to others. God comes to us in Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit we take Christ back into the world and proclaim to the world, “Here is your God.”

Who is your God? For some, God is a God of wrath and vengeance, waiting for us to make a wrong move so he can smite us with a bolt of lightning. For some, God is benevolent but not sovereign – a God who has a good and loving heart, but who cannot overcome the evil of this world. For some, God is distant and far-off, a God who created the world and who set things in motion, but who now sits back and watches indifferently.

But here is your God: Your God--our God--is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He is a God who is not content to leave us in our sin, but instead who has come to us in Jesus Christ and has redeemed us from our sin and who calls us to follow him. Your God--our God--is a God who is not bent on vengeance for what we have done wrong, but whose chief desire for us is that we may have life and have it abundantly. He is a God who does not delight in seeing us suffer, but who promises that when we pass through the torrents and the floods and the storms of life, he will not leave us or forsake us, and he will be with us every step of the way. Your God--our God--is the mighty God, the creator of this universe, sovereign over all the world. He is the baby born in the manger. He is the man nailed to the cross and the one who made the tomb empty. He is the Holy Spirit that dwells within us to comfort us and guide us. He is the King that rules from on high, and he is the shepherd who dwells with us and cares for us in our midst. And he is the Lamb that was slain.

Who is your God? Do you hear the voice that tells you to proclaim to others who your God is?

This Advent season, listen to the voices. God is telling us something. What do you hear? Do you hear what I hear? Do you hear the voice that brings comfort and redemption to a hurting and alienated world? Do you hear the voice that calls us to make room for the living God to rule in our hearts? Do you hear the voice that reminds us that

because our hope is in the eternal and faithful God, our hope is not in vain? Do you hear the voice that tells us to go up to the highest mountaintop and proclaim for all the world to hear, "Here is your God!"

Listen to the Advent voices. What do you hear? Do you hear what I hear?