



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR B, DECEMBER 6, 2020
ISAIAH 40:1-11; PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 PETER 3:8-15; MARK 1:1-8

COMFORTING WORDS FROM THE PROPHET OF ADVENT

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

500 years before the birth of Jesus, an old man sat alone in the Chaldean desert, listening for a silent word to come on the wind—to him—that he might share it with God's people. He

was a prophet. Isaiah his name. His crusty face was rugous hide tanned by decades of a desert tonic of wind and sun and sand. He would find an augur's stump rising from the

fertile loam of the Euphrates, to speak a new word of hope and deliverance to his people, whose bondage and exile by the Babylonians was ending.

Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God—prepare the way of our God, make straight a path in the desert for our God, and see that the glory of God shall be revealed. Familiar words to us, comforting words, hopeful words with a lilt that tweaks our hearts.

Isaiah was speaking to those beleaguered by ruin and destruction, beset by a loss of the familiar. But comfort is not just balm for the weary, not just an easing of the strident suffering. It intends an invitation to be strengthened—comfort is to be fortified with others, a resilience—for a journey, yes, and for a new beginning in which God is the source of strength to make our way.

The words come to us once more in Advent, as we make new beginnings, and listen for a new word to come on the wind, to us, that we may prepare a way for the new dawn to break into our lives in this moment. Do we hear it as a call to trust that God is up to something here and now?

Some ecclesiologists have traced a pattern across our religious history, that every 500 years or so, there is a major disruption

leading to reformation and new life. It is never easy. It is never fully understood in the moment, but in time, becomes clear in the air of new aliveness, a gift from God for the people of God.

Certainly Isaiah spoke into one such era, when the Restoration and return from exile occurred, the Second Exodus as it was known, when the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt, and an entire religious tradition rose from the ruins.

500 years later, another desert prophet whom we know as John the Baptist cried in the wilderness, and Jesus joined him in a nonviolent revolution, baptizing and promoting a renewed relationship with God, dusting off layers of stale or usurious practices that had accrued to disfigure the face of the religion of their experience. These two, and the ones who followed them, found a new way, centered in the margins, and the revolution rooted until it swept across an empire, speaking love to corruption, liberty to the downtrodden, and a life-giving message of hope for all.

The late Phyllis Tickle traced this circadian rhythm of religious upheaval every 500 years in a provocative little book entitled *The Great Emergence*. She said we are in the midst of

just such a great emergence, unfolding to something new we cannot fully see just yet.

Five centuries after Jesus, as the Roman empire crumbled under its gluttonous weight, the Christian monastic movement took root and flourished through the Dark Ages, as we call them now. We are inheritors of that monastic tradition. In the 11th Century, a major schism separated east and west and forged divisions that last to this day. The 16th Century saw the great reformations sweep across Europe, catalyzing a resurgence of faith and a purging of morally bankrupt religious practices.

None of these eras of remarkable change are pristine, and we should take care not to define the results in some good-or-bad binary. Not all was bad before, and not all that developed was good, but the invitation is to consider whether in it all the human institution of the Church can discover in the new development the fingerprints of God, marked by signs of spiritual renewal, restoration to a ground of being, and a newfound aliveness which informs the whole of life.

Which brings us to the current era and the proposition for us to consider—that we are in the midst of another major upheaval, presumably heralded by the decline of

Christendom as an imperial and social standard in recent decades. Let me say that I believe the demise of Christendom is by and large a good thing, affording us an opportunity to be strengthened, comforted by the revolutionary gospel of Jesus Christ without some crusty overlay of social expectation as the primary impulse that gets us to church but clouds the message once we're there.

Isn't it liberating to know you can do what you want to do, and yet there's something to all this—this Christian way and life—that speaks a fresh word to us, that draws us into the orbit of a cosmic Christ bringing fresh good news to a broken hurting world, and to you and me?

The Church exists for times such as this!

Much has been written and said this year about the importance of resilience—that spirited capacity to rise about the challenge, to sustain through it, to persevere and become even stronger in light of it. None of that diminishes the very real lived experience of loss and loneliness, and stress and uncertainty that has beset us this year especially. To be clear, this Christian story makes no sense without the shadowy haunts of a cross and the suffering and silenced Christ hung upon it.

But if Advent offers us anything, it is a fresh new word of hope, of anticipation that there are still words to be spoken on the winds of our time, and our place...words that call us to prepare a way for God to come among us...words that comfort and strengthen us to engage our God, and to trust that God is up to something here and now, working in us greater things than we could ever ask for or imagine.

So get ready, prepare yourselves, the prophet is speaking his words of hope and deliverance to us today. God is stirring among us, inviting us into a new dawn. Look to the horizon, feel the warmth of aliveness on your face. Know that you are part of a new thing taking shape. Take comfort in that. And rejoice.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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