

# **“In the wilderness prepare...”**

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

**December 10, 2017 International Protestant Church of Zurich**

**Second Sunday in Advent**

**Douglas J. Brouwer**

Our New Testament reading today comes from the Gospel According to Mark, the first chapter. Mark is generally thought to be the first of the four gospels to be written, and so I invite you to listen to the way it begins...

**The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,<sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:**

**“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”—**

**<sup>3</sup>“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,**

**‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”**

**<sup>4</sup>And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup>John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Can we talk honestly together for just a few minutes about this season of the year?

You know, I hesitate to do this because you’re going to think I’m such a Scrooge, that I have no Christmas spirit ... whatever that is. (We’ll come back that in a moment.)

But I think we should talk this morning about ... this time of year.

And before you start to worry, let me just say that I like Christmas. Can we get that out of the way? I liked it has a child. I certainly liked it as a parent. What a thrill it was with young children.

So, please don't seek me out in the Methodist hall this morning, during Cookies and Carols, and say, **"Oh, Doug, I'm so sorry, but you really don't like Christmas, do you?"**

I do like Christmas.

But ... and I'll say this as honestly as I can: I'm always so confused by this season of the year. There's such a disconnect between the way things really are and the way we wished they were, or between how we actually feel and how we think we should be feeling.

For example,

- I know that I should be happy and full of joy right now – because it's Christmas, after all – but I don't know if I feel any happier now than at other times of the year.
- I should also be creating a place in my heart to receive the Savior of the world, but who has time for that?
- I should be enjoying the Christmas markets and the staff parties and the gift giving (and I do), but I keep hearing that I should also set aside quiet time for humble reflection about a child who has been born among us, a child who will bring peace on earth and good will to all people.

Do you see what I mean? What a mess. What a jumble of ideas and stories and customs. And then, Santa Claus has somehow become part of that too. God bless you as a parent if you are trying to weave all of these narratives together for your children. It's nearly impossible.

And then, if that were not enough, add to that the darkness and the gloom. I guess I'm thinking about the shorter days in late December. But I'm also thinking about the world, the political situation. That's dark and gloomy too.

We're not the first people in history to live in uncertain times. We sometimes like to think we are. We like to think that this is the time at last when history will reach some kind of climax and conclusion.

But, as Jesus himself said, **"of that hour, no one knows, not even the Son of man."**

Is this the time when God will act? We don't know. All we can do is what believers have done through the centuries. All we can do is watch and wait and be prepared.

Some of us have parents or grandparents who lived through a world war and who experienced a sadness and uncertainty and fear that the rest of us have never known.

But there have been other times in history too, just as bleak and just as difficult. One of them was when Isaiah wrote the words we heard today from chapter 40: **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...."**

That was a time too when just about everyone had given up hope.

I think that what I would like to do today is to say clearly, or as clearly as I can, what we believe about this time of year, and what it means, and what is so precious about it, and then you can decide. You can decide to hold onto all of your old habits and customs and beliefs, if they're working just fine for you.

Or, you can embrace a different way of looking at this season of the year, one that may not seem so jumbled and confusing and chaotic. It's really up to you.

Maybe the Christmas of contemporary culture is working for you, and if so, great. I'm so glad. But you should know that there is another way to see this season – in some ways a radically different way to see this season, maybe even a subversive way – and it may be just the kind of hope that you are looking for right now.

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No other prophet comes as close as Isaiah does in telling the story with such power and poetry and drama. You already know, I think, that Isaiah contains some of the most beautiful poetry in all of Hebrew literature. The other prophets tell similar stories, of course, but no other prophet has captured our imagination as completely as Isaiah.

And it's no surprise that Handel leaned heavily on Isaiah in composing his oratorio known as *Messiah*. The libretto – many of you know this – is almost entirely based on Isaiah's words. Essentially, what he does is to set them to music.

And where does the oratorio begin? Well, it begins in chapter 40, in those verses you heard earlier. If you're attending a live performance, you barely have time to settle into your seat and listen to the overture or the symphonic opening, when suddenly a tenor begins to sing – and once you've heard these words, you can never get them out of your mind – **“Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.”**

That's where the story of salvation always begins – in our weakness and helplessness and hopelessness. When we can no longer make things right, it's then that God enters the world to set things right.

The same thing happens at the beginning of Exodus when the people are in slavery, and then God says to Moses – remember? – **“I have heard their cry, I have seen their suffering.”**

In other words, something has to be done. And I am going to do it.

Some of us here today have reached this point in our own lives. And then, suddenly, we hear it ... we hear those words. **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”**

As I mentioned last week, the word **“comfort”** has lost a little of its edge in English. When we hear the word, we think of being pampered in a five-star hotel as the very definition of comfort, and I like that too, don't get me wrong, but biblically speaking the word **“comfort”** has to do with strength and determination and resolve, finding a source of strength in a hopeless situation. That's comfort.

As Karl Barth once put it, **“comfort is finding the strength to stand up.”**

I had a theology professor in seminary a long, long time ago, and he once said to our class that the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God” should be really be “A Mighty Comfort is our God.” And then, he said, if we sang it that way, we would understand the real meaning of this word.

As it turns out, we didn't know it at the time, my professor told this same story to a whole generation of students – maybe 40 years' worth – year after year, the same story – and at his memorial service a few years ago, several hundred of his former students came back to campus, and in the seminary chapel – no one sings like seminary students – we all sang “A Mighty Comfort is our God.”

No one even had to make the announcement. We all knew what to do. It was a moment – and a word – I will never forget. A mighty comfort is our God.

And then this line – **“speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”**

What is remarkable about Isaiah is that he captures God in all of God’s fullness and depth. So, God is powerful and majestic – no question about that – but then suddenly God is also intimate and compassionate and caring.

Later in the book (in chapter 66) Isaiah writes, **“As a mother comforts her children, so I will comfort you.”** That’s not an image we usually call to mind when we think about God, but God – Isaiah tells us – is not just a powerful father, but also a tender mother, one who holds and comforts her children.

**“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,”** verse 2 says, and the sense there is that God speaks not just to our heads, but to our hearts, not just intellectually, but at the level of our feelings and emotions.

And then, finally, although there is much more – this highway. **“Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”**

In some English translations, including the one we heard today, the word for highway gets flattened out and loses some of its meaning. We tend to think of a road or a hiking path, maybe, but the word here refers something much bigger.

The “highway” in verse 3 was literally a “high” way, an elevated road. Highways in the ancient world were major roads for international trade and – maybe more important – they offered safe travel between cities. They often had drainage ditches along the sides and paving stones and good visibility, so that robbers would not have easy hiding places. And the highway mentioned in verse 3 is one of these highways.

And notice this too: the highway is not for us.

The highway mentioned here is for God. This is the road that God travels in order to reach us. And in that tiny textual insight, there is an entire gospel of grace, which I want you to see.

Most world religions tell us that life is a journey or a pilgrimage ... to God, or maybe from life to death. But it’s always our journey.

Christianity – I think this is important to know – Christianity is alone among the religions of the world because it teaches that our salvation is not about how well or how heroically we travel to God, but rather that our God in Christ has come to us.

That’s Christmas in the simplest terms I know.

Through the wilderness, God has carefully built a highway. And God has come to us. So, if anyone has taken a journey, it is God, who left behind all the splendour and majesty of the heavenly realm, whatever that looks like, in order to enter our squalid world.

It is God who became a baby, born to poor and scared parents, in a world filled with turmoil. I’m not the first person to point out that Jesus became a refugee in the first year of his life. Those were not promising circumstances. The first months of Jesus’ life were as precarious as any human life has ever known.

So, the Christmas story is the salvation story. This is God's plan to save us. Not through strength, not with a great army, not with a brilliant and decisive general or political leader, but ... in the opposite way.

God became a baby.

I love Christmas baptisms – we had one last week – because, as I hold that baby, I remember all over again how God decided to do it.

God's plan was – and is! – to come to us ... in weakness and vulnerability.

So, what I try to hold onto each Christmas is that story – not just the Christ child in Mary's arms, but that larger plan for the salvation of the whole world. And as I mentioned last week, Jesus is already here, so Christmas must be about something more.

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A few years ago in the church I was serving at the time, I introduced my congregation to a new way of thinking about this season of the year ... and it's called "**the Advent Conspiracy.**" I don't think they liked that name at first. It didn't sound like the Christmas story they had always known – with sleigh bells and lights and presents – but slowly it caught on.

We probably don't have time anymore to do it here this year, not the way it should be done, but I want to at least introduce you to the idea.

In 2006 a group of pastors in the U.S. came to the end of another Advent season feeling exhausted and sensing that they'd missed it again – namely, these are their words, "**the awe-inspiring, soul-satisfying mystery of the incarnation.**"

Instead of looking forward to Christmas each year, they dreaded the season with all of its additional demands and obligations. To them it felt like a "**creeping idolatry**" was consuming them and their churches.

People were drowning in a sea of financial debt, credit card debt, and they had an endless list of gifts to buy ... for people who really didn't need anything anyway. These were people had bought into the marketing lie that spending money is the best way to express love.

One of those original five pastors did some math. Americans, he discovered, were spending 600 billion USD every year on gifts, and (as he figured it) it would only cost 30 billion USD to provide access to clean, safe, drinkable water around the world.

And that's how the Advent Conspiracy was born – essentially as a clean water project. Anyway, the theme they developed – and this is what I introduced to my congregation – was **Worship fully, Spend less, Give more, and Love all.**

In case you're wondering, the Advent Conspiracy is no more than a website and a Facebook page. You can easily find it for yourself. There are no staff members, no overhead, no international headquarters in Geneva.

But today thousands of congregations around the world – it’s astonishing when you think about – thousands of congregations participate. They have made a commitment or a pledge to step out of contemporary culture to find the real meaning of this season.

Let me focus on just one aspect, and I’ll end with this ... gift giving.

The idea of gift giving is deeply rooted in the Christmas story. We give gifts at Christmas – in case you were wondering – because of the example God set for us. But somehow over the years even gift giving has lost its connection to story at the center of Christmas.

The best kind of giving of course is giving that’s personal and intimate and relational. Those are the gifts we like best. And that’s what I see in Luke’s account of the Christmas story. When God decided to give the world a gift, what did he do? He gave himself. Isn’t that how you read the story?

Not a new car for everyone. The good news of Christmas is that God offered himself. And it astonishes me that we forget that.

In one of the Advent Conspiracy Bible studies, I found the story of a young man who gave his father a bag of coffee beans for Christmas. And that doesn’t sound like much of a gift to give one’s father, but the gift came with one stipulation. His father could only enjoy this gift with his son.

The son said, **“In the hours and days it takes to finish that bag of coffee beans, I want you to tell me the story of your life, what it means to be a man, what it means to be a man who calls himself a believer. You may have tried to tell me before, but this time I promise to listen.”**

And suddenly, a bag of coffee beans was transformed into a deepened relationship.

I’ll give you one more example from the same Bible study materials. A father of a teenage daughter gave her two beautiful blank journals for Christmas. Not exactly what a teenage girl is hoping to receive, I’m sure. I know because I raised two of them.

But the gift came with these instructions: she was to write in one journal during the coming year, and he was to write in the other.

They would write about their experiences – one growing up and getting ready to leave home, and the other watching a child grow up and preparing for the inevitable and (speaking as a parent) painful launching of a child into the world. And then, on the following Christmas – this was the plan – they would exchange journals. Their gifts to each other.

May I tell you one more story?

The congregation I served before this one really tried to get behind that clean, fresh water aspect to the Advent Conspiracy. That’s how the movement started, after all. And so we raised money to drill a fresh water well for a church in South Africa, a church one of our members from South Africa had visited.

And the plan was that a group of us would come for the dedication, a celebration when all the work was finished. When we arrived in South Africa – representatives from this big rich church in the U.S. – we found drilling equipment everywhere in the village but no well. The drilling company had tried, several times, drilling in excess of 100 meters in various places.

And there was nothing. They came up dry every time. But – and here’s the remarkable part of the story – we had the celebration anyway. What they wanted was not our money or even the well (although I’m sure they would have welcomed that). What they wanted was our friendship, our concern and compassion for them, our Christian fellowship.

And that’s how the white Christians from America learned about the true meaning of this season. God gave us himself. Not stuff. Not material comforts. But himself.

Why is it that we have such a difficult time remembering that?

**Worship fully, Spend less, Give more, and Love all.**