

On the Way

Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2023

Ken Kovacs

Scripture

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 flesh 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 flesh is 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 forever.
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
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. 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,' "

so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region 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, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Sermon

"Comfort, O comfort my people,' says your God." The command breaks forth with urgency. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." (Is. 40:1).

The lectionary for the Second Sunday of Advent pairs Isaiah 40 with the opening of Mark's Gospel, where we find John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3). This is a season of preparation, designed for prophets, because prophets have always warned us to prepare for the Lord's coming—and not only during Advent.

How do we prepare the way for God's coming? How do you view it? With fear, thinking that God is coming to judge the earth? With joy, knowing that God comes to comfort a hurting people? Probably a little of both.

If we slowed down and stopped long enough to listen to our hearts, it wouldn't take long to confess all the ways we hinder God's arrival and movement in our lives. The Bible's favorite word for obstruction is sin. We stand in the way of God's arrival in plenty of ways. There's selfishness. Self-centeredness is a barrier. So is cold-heartedness. Hearts that are "two sizes too small," like the Grinch. [1] There's greed. Hatred. Our fear of the "other"—whoever the "other" might be. There's our inability to extend and receive mercy. Our busyness. Our cynicism. Our skepticism. Our rationalism is a barrier, and so is being too sentimental. There's our obsession with perfection. Our need to control. Our death-grip desire to possess things, people, ideas, and even God. Our wealth. Our poverty. Our arrogance. Our lack of humility. All the illusions we think are true, including the illusions and lies we tell ourselves that this long, unsettling litany isn't true.

This is some of the "stuff" that alienates us from God's presence, that keeps us exiled from God, lost, as it were, in the wilderness. This is some of the "stuff" within us, often worthy of God's judgment. What do we do? Confess our sins and do better? Work harder at being better? We know something in us needs to change. Didn't John the Baptist preach "a baptism of repentance" (Mk 1:3)?

But what if all this talk about preparing the way has nothing to do with us? Isn't this what Advent is all about preparing and waiting? Isn't this what the text says here in Isaiah and Mark? Yes, that's what it says, but that's not what it means. Sure, we can always do better.

Nevertheless, there are times when we need to get out of the way. In Isaiah 40, you and I aren't being asked to prepare for anything—because God isn't talking to us!

Stay close to the text, and we realize that Isaiah is describing a conversation in the heavens, where God is speaking at a gathering of the divine council. God is attended by angels or messengers, a council that gathers around God, listens to God's decrees, and then brings about God's will. God speaks to the divine council, "Comfort, O comfort my people" (Is. 40:1). These gracious words burst forth from out of nowhere.

And we need to know something else. Isaiah 40 marks the beginning of what is known as Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, written while Israel was in exile in Babylon. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the roughly five decades of exile in Babylon was a collective trauma for the Jewish people. They struggled for generations with how God could abandon them. The theology that emerged in exile claimed that the people were to blame; it was their fault for ignoring God's will. They came to believe that God judges a nation when it sets aside true worship, when it fails to embody God's justice, when it neglects care for the oppressed, when it

fails to care for the vulnerable, the widow, the refugee, the disenfranchised (Is. 58). Exile was God's judgment.

We also need to know that between Isaiah 39 and 40 is approximately 150 years of silence. Isaiah 39:7 warns they will become servants in Babylon. So, when I said these words of comfort burst forth from out of nowhere, it's true. God was silent, but now God speaks. "Comfort, comfort my people. 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" (Is. 40:1-2). Enough. No more judgment. It's time for tender words. It's time for healing, for homecoming.

And, so, fulfilling God's command, a member of the divine council gets to work and cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Is. 40:3). Note that it's not the people, but the divine council commissioned to work. Building the highway is heaven's job. For this is no ordinary highway. This is Yahweh's superhighway that stretches from Babylon all the way home to Jerusalem. This is an expressway. Valleys will be lifted; mountains brought low to make it easy to get from one place to another; the ground will be leveled out, nice and flat. God's army corps of engineers will construct a thoroughfare, a holy way to carry God's people home. It's holy, because it will convey the "glory of the LORD," and all will see it; "the people shall see it, together."

"Cry out!" a voice says (Is. 40:6). Isaiah hears the divine command—then resists. "What shall I cry?" Things are so bad that even God's prophet is discouraged; the prophet comes up with excuses for why this will never work: people don't pay attention or listen. "People are grass. They have no constancy. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it" (Is. 40:6-7). But the divine voice will have none of this and counters the prophet's complaint, "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever" (Is. 40:8).

So, the divine voice tells the prophet, "Get you up to a high mountain. O Zion, herald of good tidings" (Is. 40:9). *Good tidings*. This is the first intentional, self-conscious use of the term *gospel* in the Old Testament." [2] Zion, herald of the gospel! "Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,"—the gospel!—"lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See the LORD comes with his might" (Is. 40:9-10). God will prepare the way, construct the way, and then along that way, God's glory will come, and then become the way; God will carry them home and care for them like a mother (Is. 40:11). Look, for God is on the way to liberate God's people!

Sounds like the opening of Mark's Gospel, doesn't it? The opening of Mark sounds like Isaiah, but it's really a composite of several texts; Mark redacts them, and his redaction exposes his theologically subversive intent. Mark tells us, "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way for you'" (Mk. 1:2).

However, you won't find these words in Isaiah because they're not there. They're like what we find in Exodus 23:20, "Behold, I send a messenger before you and to bring you to the land I have prepared for you." And they're close to what we hear at the end of Malachi, the last prophetic book of the Hebrew scriptures. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord, whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1). The book of Malachi is followed by almost four hundred years of silence until we get to the Gospel of Mark.

And for nearly one hundred years before Mark, "the ancient rabbis and scribes held that true prophecy [had] ended with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi." [3] The rabbis felt that the prophetic voice had fallen silent forever. But Mark says to all of this: rubbish! Something new and different is stirring again in history, except it isn't happening in Jerusalem, the political and religious center, which is corrupt and blasphemous and collaborating with the Roman Empire. Instead, something new begins out in the wilderness, on the edges of society—that's where God often hangs out, not at the center but at the edge. God loves the wilderness. That's where we find John the Baptist. He's a fringe element, a lone voice—the voice of a tiny, tiny minority—that's wise enough to discern the coming of God.

Mark says a voice cries in the wilderness. A way needs to be cleared for Yahweh's advent, the coming of God. Something new, however, is required to convey the arrival of God. While most English translations read, "Prepare the way of the Lord," Mark actually substitutes a verb not found in the Isaiah text. Instead of "prepare," Mark says, "construct" (*kataskeuasei*), construct a way. [4]

Just as God provided a way when there appeared to be no way in Israel's exodus out of Egypt, just as God provided a way when Israel in exile thought the way back to Jerusalem was cut off, God provides a new way, constructs a new way to convey God's presence in the world. God's liberating way becomes the way of Jesus of Nazareth. And as in Isaiah 40, it's the voice of God that declares what should be done. God decides to come toward us in a new way. God takes the initiative. God's coming is not contingent upon our preparing for it. The decision has been made. The opening of Mark's Gospel is ambiguous and can be translated in multiple ways, essentially saying, "Behold, I (God) send my messenger"—and the messenger could be either John or Jesus or even Mark—"before your face who will construct your way." [5]

God loves to construct a way when there is no way, construct a holy way to convey God's presence into our lives, into the world. God provides the way, and then God moves on that way. The designation of Jesus as "the Way" is often associated with John's Gospel (see John 14:6). Mark is saying something similar, except *Mark isn't saying that Jesus is the way toward God, but that Jesus is God's way toward us. Jesus is the way, and God travels "on" him toward us.* Jesus is the new road God is constructing in the world, the superhighway that leads God's people to liberation. Later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is often described as being on the way, and his disciples discover the kingdom of God—this "the turning of the world" when God's justice and

liberation break into our world—they “see” the kingdom when they’re on the way with Jesus. [6] And, like them, we need to look for it.

We often think of Advent as a time of preparation. But there’s another dimension that’s often overlooked. It’s the point I’m talking around and trying to make; it’s this simple yet profound claim: *Yahweh is an advent-ing God who is always journeying toward us.* God is always coming toward us, providing a way where there is no way. Good chooses first, again and again, to deliver and save and convey us toward the place of liberation and resurrection. God constructs something radically new and different in the midst of the old world, despite our sin, despite all that tries to hinder, hamper, and obstruct God’s way. Jesus comes. He simply arrives. And there’s nothing we can do to stop it. Jesus announced the arrival of God’s kingdom and then, and only then, invited us to change, to repent, to do something about it. For Mark, the order of salvation is not repent and then believe the kingdom has come. It’s the other way around! Mark says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God *has come near*; repent and believe in the good news” (Mk. 1:15). Jesus is God’s new beginning. Jesus is God’s way. And in Jesus, God is always on the way toward us, seeking to be with us—and there’s nothing you or I or anyone else can do to stop this. This is the miracle of the Incarnation, it’s the miracle of Christmas.

As old Grinch discovered, the coming of Christmas cannot be stopped. Even though he did everything he could to stop the arrival of Christmas in Whoville, even though he tried his hardest to obstruct, hinder, and prevent the arrival of Christmas morning, he was powerless. On that day, on the Christmas Day, he had to get out of the way and yield to what was before his eyes, as the people of Whoville gathered around the light coming into the world. Grinch had to get out of the way, and then make way in his heart, to see and then to hear:

*He stared down at Whoville! The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same! [7]*

Somehow or other...it came. And it continues to come.



Image credit: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (MGM Television, 1966).

Sources

- [1] Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (New York: Random House, 1957).
- [2] Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 20.
- [3] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 125.
- [4] Myers, 124.
- [5] Myers, 124-125.
- [6] See Mark 8:27; 9:33,34; 10:52.
- [7] Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.