

Mark 1:1-8

2nd Sunday in Advent

December 5, 1993

Isaiah 40:1-11 4O comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak 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.

3A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4Every 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. 5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7The 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.

9Get 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!" 10See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11He 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

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And 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. 6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, "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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

When the snow starts falling, and the weatherman says the temperature is going down and the winds are coming up, my heart starts to tingle with anticipation. I like storms, I love storms, storms that leave the snow so deep that everything stops. Life stops if only for a day.

I always said that is why I moved to North Dakota for twelve years, in the hope that we would have lots of blizzards. We seldom did, though. And since I've moved back to Ohio the blizzards record has been even more disappointing.

I've known for some time of my love of blizzards. Friday morning when I sat down to write this sermon I realized for the first time why.

When I was young a blizzard meant that Dad would be home. A blizzard meant that Mom would not be running off to some meeting, my sister to swimming lessons, nor I nor my younger sister and brother to school. We were all home with time to bundle up to go out in the snow or sit in the house and play a game. Together. Life stopped. But the best part of life began.

Isaiah spoke of a day like that, not a blizzard, but a homecoming, the whole family together where they belonged.

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 it.”

The people were in exile. Far from home, in a foreign land, the people of Israel were scattered. But now the Lord would make a highway through the wilderness to bring all God's people home.

The way I like to hear it best is the promise at the end of our reading: “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.”

God's people are coming home. Not just physically but spiritually also, the family at home.

John the Baptist was calling people home. In his day the people symbolically acted out their coming home. He called them out to the wilderness, in baptism he brought them through the river Jordan, that they might all return to the Promised Land. True, they had been home all along, just like my family was home when I grew up, but seldom really home together.

Not a blizzard but a washing would make them family. A turning away from all that was not important in life and a turning toward God, this was John's call. Prepare the way of the Lord in your heart and in your life. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Why did it take a blizzard to get my family to stop for a moment together? Why a blizzard to make us stop all our busyness in order to have time for what was most important?

Why did it take a John the Baptist to get God's people ready for the Lord's coming? Should we not be ready in every moment, hope-filled, faith-filled, waiting?

If you are like me you just forget. We are like a builder so caught up in the bricks and the mortar that he forgets why he is building. We rush to do this or that in the church and in our community and in our family until we have no time for people, no time for our Lord. Especially in these days.

The one you have been waiting for is on his way into your life. John speaks of him in this way: “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.”

For a weak, a weary, a dispirited people, John announces one with power, one who will plant in you God's own Spirit. But I still like Isaiah's way of telling about him better.

“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.”

We need the feeding, the gathering, the carrying, the gentle leading.

Come to Bethlehem, our shepherd waits for us there.