

*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."*

#### Winter.

The sound of wind blowing outside, icicles hanging from the eaves, snow piling up in drifts, and I am in an overstuffed chair – a cup of warm tea to sip, a good book to read, logs on the fire burning gently, a quilt keeping me just warm enough.

That is how I like to imagine winter. But most of the winter moments will not be spent like that. Often I will need to grab a shovel and dig out a sidewalk or porch or driveway. Often I will wrap a scarf across my face as I walk

into a blustery wind. Often I will experience shivery cold as I move from my car to the church or store or back again. I would like all of winter to be the comfort of a cozy time before the fireplace but most of winter is not like that.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

Is this the moment settle in before the warmth and light of God’s love? Is a word of comfort God’s word to us this day? Is it time to let the winds blow outside while we cuddle closer and dream dreams of summertime in the presence of God?

“‘Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God.”

When these words were first spoken Jerusalem was in ruins – God’s people had been forced to journey to the land of their conquerors. They had lost most everything that mattered: their land, their temple, their wealth, their nation. For nearly seventy years they were exiles. It was then that the Lord sent the prophet to speak a word of comfort.

“‘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.’”

They were near the end of their time of losing. And we? The mood among us seems to say that we are only at the beginning of ours. Hard times are ahead –most of us believe that. What we do not know is how hard those times will be.

When Jesus began his ministry it was not a word of comfort that the Lord spoke but this word, “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.’”

Not a time of sitting by the fire but a time of clearing the path – pushing aside all that would hinder the one sent by God from coming to us.

John came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins clearing the way for Jesus.

We begin our worship with repentance for the forgiveness of sins. You and I search our lives for all that is not worthy of God, for thoughts that are not centered in love, thoughts focused on fear and regret rather than on faith and hope. We repent.

We repent of words that hurt and harm, words that are dishonest, words that are mean, words that tear apart the body of Christ rather than building it up. We repent.

We repent of deeds that are careless, or selfish, or greedy. We confess what we have done and what we have left undone. In this way we clear the path for our Lord to come to us and put us on his way.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

As people who are forgiven - made right with God and one another - you and I are sent out to prepare the way for Jesus everywhere he will go. The prophet promised that “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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together.”

The picture the prophet has painted is of a people not yet at rest but journeying together. The wilderness and desert are transformed into a level highway for God’s people. We travel that highway with Jesus who does not turn away from out-stretched hands. We love and we give and we share and we forgive for we are Jesus own body. Every beggar and stranger, enemy and friend is welcomed to join the procession for we journey to the New Jerusalem. The hungry are fed, the homeless are sheltered, the naked are clothed, the sick find healing, the prisoners are set free. Along the way the glory of the Lord is revealed and that glory is love in Jesus, his love flowing out of us to others.. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.”

Yes, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. Amen.