

*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.*

Lately I've been a valley. I've been singing to myself the first line of a song written by a North Dakota farmer right after the equipment he was working with broke for the third time that day. "Why won't things go the way I want them to go, why won't they do what I want them to?"

Sickness has been visiting at our house, viruses with no names but many symptoms. I haven't been very good about talking about things lately, mostly pushing things down, thinking they will go away - a valley.

But I've also been a mountain lately too. From my lofty perch I look down on the masses. I've sent letters to bishops and a seminary president, telling them what they are doing wrong. As a mountain I have just about the same view of things as God, I have an x-ray vision that enables me to see right into the heart of others. I have a wisdom that knows what is best for them, how they could move on up here with me.

"Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill be made low."

I walk, and as I walk I look. On one street I see homes that make me turn green with envy. As I walk that street I shrink. Smaller and smaller I grow as the homes get bigger and bigger.

Then I turn the corner, the homes do not wear their years well. This one needs shingles, that one has a yard with nothing but weeds. I begin to swell, my stride is crisp, my head held high.

Mountains and valleys, uneven ground - I am never one for long but seem to be whatever the world around me makes of me.

I know that is not true of all of you. Some of you are most all the time in the valley. Along the way others have convinced you that you are not worth very much, and you have believed them.

Others of you have been up in the mountains a long time. God has been good to you because you deserve it you tell yourself. You are brighter, you work harder, your children are more successful than others. Life is fair you tell yourself.

“Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall be come level and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”

When the time had come, God set about the task of making a level ground. The highest mountain of all he brought down to the lowest valley, to a stable, to a cross. Between stable and cross he sat at table with the rich, and the poor, the holy and the hooligans. The glory of God he was revealing; in Jesus God was meeting every person on level ground, as sister, as brother. In Jesus God was embracing and receiving every person right where they were, whether the house was great or small he honored it by his presence.

He is the word of God, the word which the mouth of the Lord has spoken. By him the valleys are lifted up, the mountains and hills brought low.

Here in his presence we are no longer mountains, valleys. We gather in his presence not as rich or poor, white or black, male or female, but as his sisters and brothers. We belong to Christ.

There are no sinners here. Once he has spoken his word of forgiveness to you, you are forgiven. Yesterday is a slate wiped clean, not one mark stands against you because Christ has given his life for you. There are no “better than others” persons here, for we each have the highest holiness, the holiness of Christ.

There is no shame here. There is no longer need to hide ourselves behind fig leaves, afraid that others might see us as we are. For the honor you have been given as Christ calls you his own is the highest honor, an honor that each of us shares. As we trust in the honor and glory he gives us, there is no more need to hide.

Words like success and failure mean nothing here. For in Christ God sees no mountains, no valleys, but his beloved people - one people, all together in faith.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, and 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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Our God is not content to have a small piece of level ground established here; all flesh shall see it together he promises. He sends you into the world to meet every one as a brother or sister in Christ.

Those words are easy to say. But how can we begin to see one another with the eyes of Christ? How can we learn to see beyond sloppy dress or expensive clothing? How can we learn to see the heart of a person rather than the color of their skin, or that they are male or female? This will not happen through laws, nor through pretending.

John the Baptist cried, Prepare the way of the Lord. And as preparation he called the people to repentance. Repentance is being honest before God and before one another. Repentance does not settle for outward appearances, but goes straight to the heart. There are no comparisons here, whether before other humans I am a mountain or a valley, before my Lord, I honestly know that I am a beggar. On my knees I face the truth.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," we confess. All have sinned. The truth about me is the truth about each of you. We are on level ground, and there is not one human being on the face of this earth on any other ground but Jesus who calls us sister, brother. Only as you know that truth more than anything that your eyes see and your ears hear, will the valleys be lifted up, the mountain and hills be made low.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works lest anyone should boast."

A voice cries: "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 shall 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 flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

