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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Advent 2B – December 6, 2020
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God.

Just let those words wash over you for minute.

If there was ever a time when we needed to hear words of comfort, it is right now, in the middle of a raging global pandemic. The headlines are full of stories about how this time of isolation and fear is leading to mental health problems all around the globe. Just the other day there was a story about how the virus rate has slowed down in Japan, but the suicide rate has jumped. We see doctors and nurses breaking down in tears, family members who are devastated by the losses that are piling up. Whether or not each of us has been directly impacted by Covid 19, we are all impacted by the toll it is taking all around us. Now is the time when we crave a word of comfort.

The prophet Isaiah was speaking to a people who also craved a word of comfort. They had been living in exile for 150 years. For the 40 previous chapters, the prophet has been warning the people that their sinful ways would lead to God's wrath. Now something new is happening – some Good news is breaking through. Their captivity is coming to an end and it is a new day. Their comfort is not in a new ruler, or a new temple, or even a homeland. Their comfort is in God alone. Their hope is in God whose Word alone will stand forever. Everything else will fade like the grass.

These words are God's words to a displaced people whose lives had been uprooted. These same words come to us today as people whose lives have been uprooted by this virus and

all that it brings with it. We too are a displaced people and we long to hear these words of comfort. We want our lives back, our place in the world restored. We wonder where we can turn for hope.

Both Isaiah and Mark tell us this morning that the path to hope is through the wilderness. That seems strange. What do you think of when you hear the word wilderness? Darkness? Dangerous animals? Uncleared pathways? Being lost with no signal? Wilderness can be a frightening place that leaves us disoriented. Yet this is exactly where Isaiah and Mark tell us that we will find the hope of the one who is to come. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.”

We don't have to dress in sackcloth like John the Baptist and we don't have to eat locusts in the wilderness. We are living through our own collective wilderness right here and right now. How do we prepare the way of the Lord in this unusual Advent? How do we find comfort and hope as we wander through these days of pandemic?

Maybe there is a gift here for us. During Advent we usually have to temper the joy of the season and bring ourselves back to the wilderness of waiting and the anticipation of what is yet to come on Christmas. But this year we are living in anticipation and aching for words of comfort. Mark gives us a clue in his words. He tells us that there is good news behind and ahead of us if we can open our ears and hear the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness.

Mark points back to the prophets who came before Jesus. His words of a messenger, of a voice crying out, of preparation of the path for the Lord to travel, harken back to Moses and Malachi and Isaiah. They witness to the way of God that is blazed in Israel's experiences. Isaiah says, “Here is your God!” God who rules with might and a strong arm and who gathers us tenderly in his arms and guards us as our shepherd. Where can we find this good news of God

blazed in our experiences over these months? How has God been present in ways we might not have realized or expected? How has the Spirit of God prodded us to be present for one another? As we have wandered through this wilderness that is Covid 19, how has the faith that our ancestors passed on to us kept us going in hope?

Mark also points to the Good News, the hope, that lies ahead of us. The first verse of Mark's Gospel is itself a promise. Mark doesn't call his book "The Good News of Jesus;" He calls it the *beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's only the beginning – there is still more to come. The great hope, our comfort of all comforts, still lies ahead of us, even as it surrounds us here and now.

John the Baptist is the colorful messenger this morning of that Good News that has been and will be and is in this very moment. The description of John is detailed. He is a wilderness man, clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He is a biblical character that stands out. But John's intention was not to draw attention to himself but to the one who is coming after him who is more powerful.

He calls us, as Isaiah does, to make room for God, to prepare a highway for our God to come among us. How do we prepare a path for the way ahead, the way through and ultimately beyond this time of pandemic? How do we make straight the path, even out the ground, smooth out the rough places?

John tells us we prepare by repenting. Now that word doesn't sit too well with most of us. We picture emotional revival tents and fire and brimstone. But Mark's John is not threatening. He is the herald of the Good News, of the ultimate comfort that is breaking in. John's timely

word to us this morning is to turn toward God, to surrender all that we are to this God of hope and comfort and love so that we can make straight the path for God to come among us.

This second week of Advent is an invitation to us to imagine that highway in the desert that our God will travel. It is an invitation to stay in the wilderness and look for what needs to be pruned and raked and dug up. What needs to be planted? What needs to be cut down and taken away so that there is a path for God to come among us and bring the comfort that we crave.

John is not the only one charged with crying out and preparing the way. It's all of us, right here, right now who are called to speak tenderly, to say "Here is your God." As we look back at the faithfulness of God through the ages and as we wait in joyful expectation for God's coming among us, may we cling to the hope of God's promises. And as we absorb this hope deep within, may we clear the path for others to experience hope. Our mighty and tender God says "Comfort, O comfort my people." How will we listen for that comfort during this time in the wilderness and how will we speak words of comfort to one another?