**Isaiah 40:1-11**

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

 2 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.

 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

 4 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.

 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

 9 Get 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!"

 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

 11 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, the Son of God.

 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

 5 And 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.

 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

 7 He 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.

 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

**TURNING TO COMFORT**

This picture comes to mind…. Almost like a show I once hopped into why channel hopping – I think it is called “Naked and Afraid” – without the naked and afraid of course. Or maybe something like survivor without the scheming and conniving. This is the picture of John – a true survivor man. You know, kind of gruff, somewhat dirty… the guy who picks berries as he goes, taking on beehives for honey and flipping a rock or two for some fresh insects. He was oddly dressed, wearing clothes of camel hair and a leather belt. And to top of this crazy picture, he was calling out in a voice; a voice that calls to make straight the way for the Lord. A voice calling out from the prophecy of Isaiah. It makes you want to ask “What, you saw him out there in the wilderness?” or maybe “Are you a little high on something that you shouldn’t have eaten?”

So, why this crazy picture in the wilderness, when we are expecting a little baby, swaddled in cloth in a manger? Why does Mark start with this story: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son.”, and skip to John, instead of the story we know from the other gospels, which we love so much. Maybe we get John, because Jesus is not here yet. John, who preaches in the wilderness, who calls for repentance and baptism and to make straight the way for the Lord, so that we are ready when he comes.

“You had better get washed up,” he preached, “because the long-awaited Messiah is on his way!” Mark says that people surged out into the wilderness, despite the inconvenience, to hear John’s sermons. Jerusalem emptied, and even residents of the hinterland in Judea all come to hear John preach. (I was thinking John must be quite a preacher. If people streamed from all over Maine to come here…)

And this was John’s message: “One stronger than I am is coming after me. I’m not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”. That’s it? This is why people came to the wilderness?

But the wilderness is oddly familiar, isn’t it? Israel knew it all too well after spending 40 years there, before entering the promised land. And again, they were in the “wilderness” of unfamiliar lands and oppression in exile. Jesus spent 40 days there with the devil. We sometime feel we are in the wilderness, in the times we live. Threats of war, wildfire’s, mass shootings, sexual harassment, joblessness, incurable diseases, racism, sexism…We feel cut off, far away, from God, just like the Israelites did…. We know that people in every age have felt that distance caused by sin and guilt, and struggled to reach across it, but God will not forget God's people, or the covenant God has with them.

The wilderness is the place ripe to hear the word of God, the setting where our true identities are found and formed, the space where transformation begins - for the Israelites, for Jesus, for those who came to John the Baptist and for us. Liminal, in-between, awe-inspiring, frightening places that jolt us out of the familiar and force us to look hard at who we are and who we wish to be. The wilderness is the place to hear prophets and actually care what they have to say. The wilderness is also that part of us that needs clearing and taming.

And here is where John shows up – introducing a newness and preparing us for newness. If we want to be immersed in the life-giving power of God, then we must do as John says. Get ready for the newness. Prepare a way for the Lord. Repent. Prepare for the newness that will break the tired patterns of fear in our lives. Isaiah also announces God’s intention to visit God’s people. God, through the prophet, urges people to get prepared, telling them, “I’m coming, ready or not.”

Getting ready is not mainly about busy activity, entertaining, and fatigue. Getting ready time is mainly abrasive… asking, thinking, pondering and redeciding. The Greek word for repent means “to change.” But somewhere along the way we've picked up a different notion of repentance. I suspect our understanding of repentance is more associated with “hell fire and brimstone” and is characterized by cartoons with a long-bearded man and his sign which announces the end of the world and calls people to repent, lest they be damned eternally. It's no wonder that people get turned off by this matter of “repentance.” That's heavy stuff. If I had to live under that kind of a cloud, I wouldn't be too crazy about repentance. No, repentance simply means to change —*to turn around and walk in a new direction*. In short, to “reverse direction.”

Advent means waiting, but it is not a time for casual waiting – it is active. There are daily disciplines, day-to-day exercises of Advent that takes time and intentionality. It requires both the outrageousness of God and the daily work of decreasing so that Jesus and God’s vision of peace may increase. God calls us to actively prepare in this moment for what will be in the next. Go to the wilderness and cry out, recognize the wilderness present within and confess.

The question is, are we willing to go? Willing to recognize what we are currently doing in our lives that keeps us from being sensitive to God’s presence in our life and the lives of people around us? For some of us, it is working too hard. For some of us, it is too much ambition. For some of us, it is too much greed. For some of us, it is a negative attitude and outlook. For some of us, it is inner hostility and resentment. For some of us, it is a chip on our shoulder. For some of us, it is a hatred that we won't let go of; the lack of forgivenss. For some of us, it is even too much religion in the form of false piety and arrogant self-righteousness.

I don't really want to face the wilderness, without or within. I understand fully the impetus to make excuses for my behavior and that of the church. I want to stay safely in the privacy of my home. But the voice crying out from the wilderness can't be ignored. It is loud, relentless and strangely beguiling. Maybe there is something in us that wants to have integrity. Some small part of us longs to be transparent, vulnerable, unburdened, anticipating the judgment of God - because we know the one who comes in the wake of the baptismal waters of John is Jesus, the One who comes to save sinners and I don't want anything to impede his arrival. Confession, repentance in the wilderness? Maybe. Preparing the way for the Lord? I certainly hope so.

*Because if Christmas is really about an encounter with the Holy One, then Christmas must also be about change*—changes in our values and priorities, changes in our attitudes, changes in the way we treat others. We are called to drop the barriers that we erect in our lives which prevent us from being open and sensitive to the spirit of God!

Jesus must increase, and we must decrease. So, what do we do while we wait in the Advent season? We turn… Just as John embodied what is old and Jesus what is new; we turn from old to new. Turn from what is old and habitual and destructive in your life so that the new life-giving power of Jesus may large within you. Turn from what is greedy, what is frantic consumerism, to simple, life-giving sharing. Turn from what is fearful and defensive, to the increase of life-giving compassion and generosity. Turn from what is fraudulent and pretense, to the increase of life-giving truth-telling in your life, truth-telling about you and your neighbor, about the sickness of our society and our enmeshment in that sickness. Turn from what is hateful and alienating, to healing and forgiveness, which finally are the only source of life.

In all of this preparation, can there be any comfort for us? Not the comfort of having more than what we need – a roof over our heads, food, clothing and safety. The comfort of the motherly God who comforts us and holds the lambs in her arms? The comfort from having God’s presence in our hearts? God’s comfort, which is an overwhelming truth that surpasses the feeling of having “enough”? The comfort of our God, who lives deep in our lives, even when we don’t think about it, even if we may not believe it, even if our fear blinds us to that presence.

In repentance and turning lie our word of hope. Hope for valleys raised up, mountains laid low! In preparing, we see how the coming of the Lord will level the way for all people to see God’s glory and share in God’s goodness – his compassion, release and forgiveness; the promise of restoration and a great homecoming.

Therein lies our comfort. The comfort of knowing that repentance and turning opens us to the newness of what is to come. It clears space for the indwelling, incarnate Christ to take up the space of all that was. The comfort of a new heaven and a new earth, wrought by God, where there will be no more the sound of weeping, no more homeless folks to moan, no more broken folk to whimper, no more terrorized folk to cry out. No more infant mortality, no more infants who live but a few days, and no more old people who will die too young or live too feebly or continue as a shell while the life is gone. No more usurpation of people’s homes, no more destruction of war. Those who build will stay around to inhabit, those who plant will survive to harvest and enjoy their produce. No more inequality, oppression and marginalization; no more worrying about a planet used to the point of no return; no more refugees and homelessness; no more terminal diagnoses and fear. Every person will live safely under a vine and fig tree, safe, unafraid and at peace. God will be attentive, like a mother who hears and answers in the night, knowing before we call who is needed and what is needed. We shall never be left alone again. That is the true comfort of the lamb in the arms of God.

May it be so.