

Preparing the Way

First Congregational Church Branford

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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The prophet Isaiah speaks good news to the Israelites in the darkness of their Babylon captivity:

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 for ever.

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 begins his Gospel with the crying out of that voice:

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

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'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" ',

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

The word of God for the people of God.

In these two scriptures we read about a messenger preparing the way of the Lord. Isaiah, a prophet in the time of Israel's captivity in Babylon 2,700 years ago, proclaimed the good news God's people had been waiting long to hear - that deliverance was at hand - God's people were to be brought home to Jerusalem. But, as I pointed out last week, *sometimes the good news doesn't happen right*

away - Israel didn't return to Jerusalem until 250 years later - by then Israel was under Persian rule, then Greece invaded. Then, there was 80 years where Israel actually ruled herself!... until Rome invaded 60 years before Jesus' birth.

But, back in Isaiah, you can only imagine how it felt to the Hebrews to hear Isaiah tell them that God had forgiven them - for breaking his commandments during the exile - and now they should be comforted, and spoken to tenderly, to be assured that exile would not last forever. God couldn't stay angry with them forever. God loved them! With God's tender words, the Israelites were then able to *hold on*, even when God didn't act right away. It's like, isn't it, once you've been assured that God hasn't left you alone, when you've received comfort, and tender words, when you hear God say to you, *you are my child and I will never let you go*, it gives you strength to endure. *I love you. You are mine. And, I am yours.* Beloved, if you've received some strength in this way, maybe think of someone who could use a tender word from you, a hand on a shoulder, a caress of a cheek today or in the week ahead. Give some strength and assurance - to someone sitting in darkness.

In the Gospel of Mark, John the Baptist, a learned rabbi, quotes from Isaiah, referencing himself as that messenger for the Messiah, the one who was coming to save Israel from her captors. The promise so long ago in Isaiah had been delivered!

Preparing the way for the Messiah. For sure, as I spoke with the children, we could look at our hearts to see where any old, decaying brush is, in order to clear it away for the Christ to take residence in us.

But, today I'm more interested in how this is a season when many of us go into high gear, and get stressed!! - which isn't exactly a receptive condition in which to prepare the way of the Lord. Am I right?... Remember, it was a *silent* night, where all was *calm*. *Oh, when we overflow with stress, soothe us with your serenity.* When we're overwhelmed with the desire for more and more stuff, more and more baking, more and more doing, prepare our lives to receive you. And, fill us with your peace."

I invite us to now sing the Taize hymn printed in your bulletin. We'll sing it 3 times through. (*Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone, O Lord, are holy. Come and fill our hearts with your peace. Alleluia.*)

There was recently an article in the New Haven Register that millennials, those 23-38, are seeing more anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. The article gave the reasons of feeling pressure to be successful, worries about student loan debt, and emotional issues stemming from the use of social media, which creates a phenomenon of comparison. They get anxious when they don't get validation of "likes" for something they've posted, or the likes don't come in as quickly as they

feel they should. It devastates them. That's the culture these poor dears have been brought up in. Looking for validation from the outside.

This is the age group that's missing in our churches. What they most need they resist. If they could just be brave enough to enter an open-minded church - not all churches preach a damning theology - maybe if they would be brave enough to walk in here, they would hear something like this:

Jesus says, *Believe* that I have come to bring you peace....

Peace, my beautiful 25 year old... my 35 year old son, I bring you peace... put down your phone... I am here. Peace. Peace....

...And, now back to all of us and this hectic season:

There's no peace for the hurried. I recalled that after Thanksgiving last year, life felt crazy to me. And, so, I just stopped, laid down, and maybe it sounds silly, but I imagined cuddling with Jesus - men can cuddle with Jesus, too - and should! It's highly recommended - especially for independent people! I held him, and even better, I let him hold me. I breathed.... and, the stress melted away. He stroked my hair. I was then able to get done what I needed *and kept my serenity*.

Yes, please. More of that. And, then, this week, God whispered: comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to her.... You are good, FCCB. You are so sweet. You are adorbs! You dear, sweet people! Your long exile without a truly settled senior minister will soon come to a close. You are so good.

And now, I invite us to just be in our body. God became a body - so, bodies are holy. Let's love them, *exactly as they are*. Let's prepare the way of the Lord by having a body/heart/mind/soul at peace. I thought we'd do some gentle shoulder and neck rolls. If you have *any* issues with your dear neck and spine, either sit this out, or go extra gently.

Remember to breathe, keep breathing through it - that's the most important thing - try not to hold your breath - keep it flowing. You can close your eyes if you wish. Try to sit upright, to not slump or slouch - and then move your shoulders up and around to the back a few times - then reverse directions - move them forward a few times - breathe.... drop your head forward - stay sitting tall, and breathe, hold... come back up... then turn your head *slowly, slowly*, to the left - hold, breathe - come back through center - and turn your head slowly to the right - hold, breathe.. come back to the center - maybe move your shoulders just all around.... now, slowly tilt your head to the left - hold - maybe very gently place your left hand on your head for a tiny bit more pressure - be careful with your beautiful neck - you can play around with bending your head a little - find some good spots to stretch - hold and breathe. Drop your left hand, and bring your head back up - and now, slowly tilt your head to the right - hold - gently place your right hand on your head - and bend forward a little - hold and breathe - play around with some good spots to stretch. Drop your right hand, and bring your head back up. Now, drop

your head forward, and lift up your arms and clasp them gently around the back of your head - don't pull - please be gentle - don't hurt your beloved body! And, then, turn your head to the right and look out over the top of your arm - like a window created there - hold, breathe - then come through center - and slowly turn to the left and look out the window there.... breathe.... - and now with your hands still clasped, come back up, and wing out your bended arms - don't smack anyone! - hold, breathe... gently bring your arms down.

Finally, place a hand on your heart, and your other hand on your belly, and breathe.... and if you feel like it, silently say - Jesus, come live with me.... I want to be a safe place for you to lay your head.... come and fill my heart with your peace... Amen...