



Advent 2 / B

**“Traveling the Broad Highway of God”**

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

6 December 2020

“Comfort! Comfort, my people! . . . Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain made low. . . . and he shall feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs with his arm.”

What heart-lifting words we hear from our God shouted across the millennia and echoing into our very own day. The prophet Isaiah offers us images in just eleven verses that have become the focus of artists and musicians who have turned the prophet’s words into magnificent paintings and music that channel our thoughts and deliver us deep into the heart of God. We are grasped by our God’s embrace and held tightly – our fears and concerns known by this God who wants us to share with him our worries and fears, trust that he hears us, and know that our concerns are as important to God as they are to us.

A tenor opens Handel’s “Messiah” with a delicate, yet brilliant, “Comfort ye! “Comfort! Comfort!” This is the voice of our God calling out to us – offering us hope and strength in this world torn by evil and war, intolerance and debilitating poverty.

And we ask: Comfort? Can there really be any comfort for us amidst all these troubles?

Comfort. It is certainly easier to expect for those of us who live in a relatively safe country, for those of us who have more than we need – a roof over our heads, plentiful food, warm clothing, a comfortable bed, safety and security. But there is an inherent danger here, for the “comfort” God offers is not to be confused with the world’s definition and obsession with

“comfortable.” We can easily become comfortable – easily become too comfortable, and too complacent - which is vastly different from what God offers us, finding comfort with God. Being comfortable with earthly material goods and financial resources can become a goal, an end in itself, and we can lull ourselves into believing that being comfortable is enough. We may indeed be satisfied with being comfortable - until life takes a disastrous turn, and we find that a deeper, more interior, more fulfilling, more life-filling comfort is needed.

In this Advent season, we will often hear and use the term “Emmanuel,” “God with us.” Sadly, we can become so comfortable with God’s presence in our hearts and lives that we can take it for granted. But this isn’t the comfort Isaiah is talking about. His comfort is an overwhelming truth and surpasses the feeling of having “enough.” His comfort is the comfort of our God, who lives deeply embedded within our lives, even when we don’t think about it, even if we may not believe or feel it, even if our fear blinds us to that divine presence and comfort.

The prophet Isaiah goes on to explain what the truth of God will do for us. Valleys will be raised up, mountains will be laid low! No, Isaiah is not talking about a massive infrastructure project, or disastrous natural environmental event ... he’s, of course, using an image to explain how the coming of the Lord will level the way and open up the sight lines and far horizons, enabling all people to see God’s glory and share in God’s goodness.

What a wonderful image! Instead of struggling over the rocky wilderness paths up into the mountains and down across arid deserts, the people – all people - will have a safe highway, broad and smooth, over which to travel to join with God. We are assured that even in life’s most difficult moments, Emmanuel, God will be with us, leading the soul along that safe, broad highway to be joined forever with him in his glory and majesty.

“But, don’t be so naïve,” some may want to argue. “Open your eyes and take a long, hard, honest look at the world around us. See the things happening to people that make a rocky path and an arid desert walk look like a picnic in the park. Surely this ancient fantasy image of raising low places and smoothing out mountains doesn’t work in our current reality.”

And that's true. Consider the tumultuous times we currently find ourselves living in. For most of us, the year 2020 cannot end soon enough. And we live in hope that 2021 can only be better – after all, we may say, it can't get much worse.

Climate change. Economic upheavals. Rising COVID infections and deaths. Depression-era unemployment numbers. Political and national uncertainties. Wars. Assassinations. Nuclear proliferation. Debilitating poverty. Child hunger rates skyrocketing. Miles-long food lines in the world's richest nation. Life seems to throw ever more obstacles into our paths. Just where is this easily traveled highway Isaiah speaks of and God promises us?

We continue reading the prophet's words and find that, yes, we are all grass, and grass withers and fades; we are mortal, and life is often difficult. So, to make this highway image work at all in this world, we are told we must work together. We must want this world to change. We must also see beyond this mortal life and trust in God's promise of eternal life.

"All people shall see it together," says Isaiah. One way to think about this image is that we won't see it if we harbor exclusion in our hearts. When we choose to separate ourselves from any of our neighbors, we begin to gaze inward and see only ourselves. We may not be aware of it, but concentrating on ourselves makes us stumble along the rocky path of injustice and intolerance and sadness – a path that causes us to circle only inward, shutting out the light of God and love of others, blindly walking deeper and deeper into the cavernous darkness of self.

Another way to think about it is to look at what happens when groups join forces out of hatred for others, or ignorance, or fear. The Israelites sometimes found themselves carried off to foreign lands because of their unfaithfulness. Some then took on the practices and idolatry of the pagan nations, to their downfall. They lost everything. We see the same thing happening today. Children get caught up in bullying, out of fear or a need to be seem superior. Young people join gangs for acceptance they cannot find elsewhere. People are drawn into terrorist organizations, to the horror of their families and friends. Others chase after wealth or fame or security, trying desperately to be free of worry and concern, only to find themselves heavily burdened by the very issues they sought to escape. Sadly, we can

easily be lured off the highway of our God by temptation and the false, bright promises of evil.

But all is certainly not lost. If we keep reading, we come to the final image of the passage and can't help but hear again Handel's "Messiah," when the soprano's beautiful voice sings, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and he shall gather the lambs with his arm."

Here is our great hope, for on our worst days, the Good Shepherd is with us. We need only to turn back and allow him to offer us comfort and forgiveness. The sheep of his flock are a community – a community like this, a community like us, a community like Church of the Messiah. Together, a community can offer healing and love to those who have been excluded. And a community can come together to begin dealing with the issues of poverty and helplessness, hunger and oppression, violence and hopelessness.

But here's the really Good News that the prophet's words bring! We don't have to build that broad, level highway ourselves; God does that for us. God builds us the highway that leads us to the very heart of God - if we will only open our eyes and hearts to the gifts God has placed in our midst. We can begin demolishing the lure of evil, the temptation of ill-gotten power and greed if we work together, being unafraid to proclaim and teach about the power and graciousness of our God – if we ourselves will only trust that God is our shepherd, believe that God is our comfort.

In just a couple of weeks, in the quiet, early morning darkness of December 25<sup>th</sup>, the Incarnation of our God will once again descend over us like a blanket of stars. We will be filled with the songs of angels, the gentle amazement of shepherds, and the humility of kings. If the image and the songs of Bethlehem can fill us on that day, let us pray in these last few weeks of waiting that our hearts will be filled with the comfort of God and strengthened to bring that Good News to all the people of the world – not only for one day, but every day.

Amen.