

Year B, Advent 2

Isaiah 40:1-11

The Isaiah text of “Comfort” comes at a time when Jerusalem has been conquered by the Babylonians. The temple destroyed, the walls of the city levelled, and many taken off into captivity in Babylon. This is what is being referred to in verse 2, “she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

The “wilderness” in verse 3 is a reference to the actual landscape surrounding Jerusalem, and also to the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness after fleeing captivity Egypt. It was in this first wilderness experience that the glory of God was revealed to Moses, and the 10 Commandments were given. And so once again, the glory of God will be revealed, but this time “all people shall see it together.” There will be a universal – not just Moses – recognition of the glory of the God of Israel.

Verses 6-8 comment on the frailty of people who wither and fade in contrast to the word of God which endures forever. This reminds us that whatever our present circumstance – happy or sad – it will pass away, and so we need to place our hope only in God.

Verses 9-11 go on to proclaim that even in the midst of Jerusalem’s present defeat, the prophet is called to herald the good news of God’s strength and God’s victory. Again there is an interesting shift in imagery as the “arm of God” which “rules” in verse 10, becomes the embrace of the gentle shepherd in verse 11. For Christians, the shepherd imagery refers both backwards to King David and Psalm 23, and forward to Jesus, “The Good Shepherd.”

Mark 1:1-8

Mark begins by quoting the Isaiah passage above in verses 1-3, and immediately in verse 4 introduces John the Baptizer appearing in the wilderness, thus making the link between John, the Isaiah prophecy, and the first wilderness experience with Moses. In the ears of the people of Jesus’ time, this set an air of great expectation of the fulfillment of God’s return. And so the people came out in large numbers to hear John (verse 5). John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was to cleanse people in preparation for meeting God.

The Holy Spirit (verse 8) is referred to only in the Second Testament, and so we are introduced not only to Jesus as the Son of God, but also to the Holy Spirit.

Sermon Thoughts (Not the sermon)

I’m always struck by how the images in Isaiah 40 – straight roads, valleys filled in, mountains levelled, rough places smoothed out – remind me of Saskatchewan. Can Moose Jaw be the new Jerusalem?

Isaiah speaks his words of comfort at a time of great calamity, loss and chaos. The way things had been were now changed and gone forever, and the future was bleak and unknown. He speaks words of comfort NOT because PEOPLE are resilient, strong, courageous, resourceful, hard-working, dedicated, etc. Indeed, Isaiah reminds us of an inescapable reality – people are like flowers and grass that wither and fade. And so too our resilience, strength, courage, resourcefulness, hard work, dedication, etc. also wither and fade with us. No. Isaiah finds comfort only in the one thing that does not wither and fade – the word of God.

In the Bible, the word of God is also God’s action. And so the word “Comfort” in verse 1 becomes God’s action in verse 11.

It is crucial to note that the arm of God which “rules” in verse 10 is not used to punish and smite, but to comfort. The strength of God is always used to restore relationships and make the whole earth harmonious.

Unlike us, John the Baptizer is a wild and woolly character. But like us, he lives to point people to one who is greater than himself. John is the first Christian in the sense that he is the first who gives witness to Jesus.

John baptizes with water, Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. One washes the outside as a sign of an inner cleansing of our souls. But with Jesus, our souls ARE cleansed, and our outward behaviours are a sign of an inner reality.

Questions

1. Where do we look for comfort? Do the things we look to for comfort endure or wither and fade? How would our life, attitudes and behaviours change if we looked to God for comfort?
2. How do we imagine the “arm of God?” How do we see God’s power, God’s righteousness; and God’s mercy and love?
3. How much do we personally, and does our church collectively, explicitly witness to Jesus?
4. How much are we personally, and our church collectively, still having received only baptism in water (outer reality of a spiritual sign), and not also baptism in the Holy Spirit (inner reality which leads to outward signs)? Are our actions an outer facade that disguise an inner emptiness? Or do our actions reflect an inner truth?