

**The Way of the Lord**  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**Isaiah 40:1-11**

- <sup>1</sup> Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.
- <sup>2</sup> 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.
- <sup>3</sup> A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- <sup>4</sup> 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.
- <sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
- <sup>6</sup> 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.
- <sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.
- <sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.
- <sup>9</sup> 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!"
- <sup>10</sup> See, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.
- <sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This morning in Isaiah, we again join the Israelites in exile, the exile forced upon them by the Babylonian Empire. The people we are cannot know what the exile was like for them as a people, being forced out of their homes and their community, forced to give up their faith and their culture and adopt a new faith and a new culture forced upon them, but that doesn’t mean the experience of exile is completely foreign. To be exiled is to be banished or expelled from one’s country or home.<sup>1</sup> Modern exile doesn’t need to involve a physical move; an emotional or spiritual separation is just as real as a physical one. When life happens to push you out of your familiar ways, unexpectedly and in an undesired way, you experience a form of exile, a banishment from normal, from comfortable. Your own exile from the familiar might consist of a difficult time, a difficult week, a difficult year or longer. In the same way, the believers in Mark were experiencing their own exile. Christopher R. Hutson says, “For Mark, John is like the voice that announces ‘comfort’ to the exiles in Babylon. Although first-century Jews were not in exile, they were under foreign occupation. It was as if the Babylonian exile had followed them home, and Isaiah 40 [our first reading, which is also quoted in our second reading, in Mark] offered a fitting analogy for those who looked for restoration.”<sup>2</sup>

Both the exiled Israelites and early believers who were being persecuted wondered if and worried that they had been forgotten by God. They wanted to know that they were still God’s and that God still had plans for them. Last week we learned some background on the people of Isaiah’s time. Hutson paints a picture around the times of the early believers. He says:

Imagine you live in Galilee around 70 CE. There’s a war on. Some radical Jews have revolted against Rome, and Jerusalem is under siege. Reports are that conditions in the city are bad.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exile?show=1&t=1322880969>

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 46.

People are divided. Some see God raising up leaders to push the infidels from the Holy Land. Others urge submission to Rome as the path to peace and security. Everyone is anxious, caught between resentment of heavy-handed soldiers and fear of extremist guerillas. Furthermore, Emperor Nero died last year, and there is unrest in Rome. Four men have been acclaimed emperor, only to be assassinated. Now Vespasian, the very general besieging Jerusalem, has been crowned...Your village population is mixed, Jews and Gentiles, and tensions are high. Neighbors fear one another.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus died and rose from the dead nearly forty years before Mark wrote his gospel. Mark wants the believers to know they have not been forgotten. His missive begins, fittingly, with “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The good news which began seventy years before has not ended; it continues in their time; they are not alone.

If the people believed they had been forgotten, it’s possible that they began to forget about God. If God doesn’t care about me, why should I care about God? We like to think of Advent and the time of preparation for Christmas as a “warm fuzzy” kind of time. Certainly the birth of Christ is a joy to celebrate. But if you grieve? If you have pain or anger or confusion in your life? If you feel alone or depressed or afraid or powerless? If it feels like God is not with you, how can you celebrate the coming of Christ when you doubt that God is with you here and now? You are not alone. You are not the first to approach Christmas with a feeling other than the wonder of a child. You are not alone in wondering how God can be present or if God will ever come again into your life. You have company in these pews; you have company in the pages of your Bible. If God came to the Israelites and the people of Jerusalem and Galilee and Nazareth, then God is coming to you and to me and to all who suffer. Scholar Judy Yates Siker reminds: “In this Advent season he comes. Perhaps not as might be expected; perhaps not in the time frame desired - but he comes.”<sup>4</sup>

As Christians we believe that we are meant to live out our faith in community, sharing ups and downs, learning from one another, challenging one another to live more fully into the faith modeled by Christ. We cannot fully live out our faith individually but must do so as a community. There are so many times and reasons when this holds true. When you are out of hope, a family of faith carries hope for you until you are ready to claim it again yourself. One of the beautiful complexities of Scripture is that it speaks of the past, the present, and the future all at once. The messenger in Isaiah and the messenger of John the baptizer in Mark are not the same messengers and yet they both prepare the way of the Lord. In the same way, we here today are called to be messengers and prepare the way of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 44 & 46.

<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 49.

Lord. Others will come after us as messengers until that day when Jesus comes again. When a community of faith carries hope for the hopeless, they are messengers of the good news.

One's job is not quite done by carrying the good news, though. John the baptizer proclaimed a baptism of repentance, of turning back to God, for the forgiveness of sins. For the good news to be *received*, a way must be prepared. To make straight a highway, to lift up the valleys, to make low the mountains and hills, to level uneven ground, and to make rough places a plain, obstacles must be removed. In yourself, what needs to happen so you can prepare your heart and your mind to receive God? I cannot know what impedes you; sometimes I'm even unable to comprehend what impedes me. What I do know is that we each have impediments. God comes, with or without obstacles; God came to the Israelites and to the early believers and God is coming again to you and me. How well we receive God depends on what remains to be cleared. Some obstacles can be removed just by recognizing and acknowledging them; others take years of effort and thought to remove. The good news is God comes and God is coming again. If forgiveness eludes you this Christmas, just keep working on removing that obstacle. If anger still burns bright this Christmas, just continue. The good news is God comes and God is coming again.

As if your own self was not enough of a challenge, our work does not end with ourselves. We must prepare the way within ourselves, it's true; as Christ's ambassadors, we are called to prepare the way for the world, too. We are to be messengers in the wilderness, crying out to others, helping others prepare the way as well. Each community of faith does this in their own unique way. We have begun identifying our own unique way this fall. We feel called to make our presence as a family of faith known in the community, bringing Christ outside of these doors. We feel called to bring Christ's message of love and comfort to people outside the borders of this country. We feel called to keep connected to the power of faith in community those people who might otherwise slip away because of illness or disability. We feel called to share Christ's care for the least of these, especially the children in this community. Together we will make a straight way, removing the obstacles that make it easy for people to forget, to not see, to ignore that Christ is present and is active through his people who come to worship in this place. Together we will be a herald of good tidings, lifting up our voice with strength, proclaiming, "Here is God!"

Let us pray: God of fierce power and gentle love, work within us that we might prepare your way that you might be received in us and in others. Amen.