

Advent 2 (B)¹ Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

There are days when it is really very difficult to be the person who has to stand up here and have something to say. In our Isaiah reading this morning, a voice says “Cry out!” And the prophet responds, “What shall I cry?” I know the feeling. But the response the prophet gets is “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.” So this morning, we are going to talk about good news. We are going to talk about how good news begins. And this is not escapism, it is the pattern of the Bible.

You see, when the prophet in Isaiah receives the command to get up a mountain and start proclaiming good tidings, it doesn't seem like the most auspicious time for yukking it up. The first 39 or so chapters of Isaiah are mostly warnings: turn from your wicked ways, or the worst is going to happen. And by the time that we get to chapter 40, the worst has happened. Israel has been conquered by Babylon and many of the people have been carried off to exile, forcibly relocated to Babylon. Far from home, in exile, subservient to a foreign people, with no freedom—and this is when the good tidings start.

I noticed two themes running through our readings from Isaiah and Mark this week. The first is good news, and especially the beginning of good news. But the second—is the wilderness. Of course we want good news to come in pleasant circumstances—perhaps as we're watching Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer or, God help us, Peter Pan Live, while we sip our hot chocolate and reflect on all things being right with the world. But in Isaiah and in Mark, good news begins in the wilderness. Historically, the desert lay between Babylon, where the prophet was in exile, and Israel—so the wilderness is the space between you and where you feel at home. In Isaiah, the wilderness is that lowest point of despondency. It is the desert.

It isn't pleasant. It's hot, and more or less uninhabited, and has the darkest nights, and dangerous animals, and possibly brigands and bandits. But it is also the place from where good news comes: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Most of us have experienced what has been called the dark night of the soul—the place where we have lost sight of hope, whether it's for ourselves, or someone we love, or a community that we're part of (whether we like it or not). And this is the wilderness. But there, in that wilderness, God is coming. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

In Mark, I think the wilderness is a little bit different. Here, the wilderness is even more explicitly the place where good news begins. Mark's gospel has no Christmas story, no “birth narrative.” We just open with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” and then we're in the wilderness with John the Baptizer. John is something of a wild man—he's dressed strangely, in camel hair, and he keeps a very odd diet of locusts and honey. He's outside the norms of society and the patterns of authority, but the people are thronging to him. In Mark, the wilderness, where the good news begins, is the place outside of our comfort zone, where we are not in charge, where we are not necessarily safe.

¹ This has been a difficult two weeks for our country. Today's sermon makes reference to and is partially in response to the recent grand jury decisions in Ferguson and Staten Island. However, I know that there is a diversity of views in our congregation on the issues raised by these decisions. I also know that there is some room for faithful disagreement on these issues. I believe that this sermon does not discount, silence, or condemn Christian views that differ from mine. I have tried to respond faithfully to these issues in a way that can also speak to people with different views from mine. I welcome further discussion, even potentially painful conversations.

The good news is being proclaimed—the best news, the news that God has come to us. But to hear it, we have to leave our comfort zones, we have to go where things are less predictable, where we're put in the hands of someone who doesn't look entirely trustworthy. Just think for a moment about this baptism of repentance John is doing in the river. You go to a crazy person, and ask him to dunk your whole body underwater. And then you trust him to pull you back out. It's disconcerting, to say the least. But if we want to hear the good news, and eventually to become part of the good news, then those of us who are comfortable are going to have to take some risks.

So the good news begins in the wilderness, in the desert, and this can mean a few different things. But who tells the good news? In Mark, it's John the Baptizer, whom I've already described a little. He is an unsavory character who is telling hard truths and asking a great deal of people. Eventually, he gets executed by the government. He is, decidedly, not an Episcopalian. Knowing his favorite foods of locusts and wild honey, we would not let him sign up to host coffee hour. "Perhaps your gifts are best used elsewhere. Like buildings and grounds. Or the vestry." I think that what this tells us now is that if we want to hear the gospel, we have to be prepared to listen for it in places where we might not expect it. And to expect to hear truth from people we wouldn't expect to have something to tell us.

In Isaiah, I see someone much more like me, at least now that I've gotten a haircut. The prophet in Isaiah is commissioned by God to go tell the good news to people who may not be ready to hear it and his first response is "What? What on earth should I say?" This is me, and I suspect that it's quite a few other people in this room. We have been commissioned to get out there and comfort God's people, to be heralds of good tidings, to proclaim that every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain laid low. We, like this prophet, are also called to go prepare the way of the Lord in the desert, in the places of the world's pain, and hunger, and darkness. That is where the way of the Lord is to be prepared, and we're the ones who are supposed to be preparing it. But we have no idea what to say. We're not experts, we're a little reluctant. If we can find a way out, we will.

But this is the thing: hearing the good news makes demands on us. The gospel is free, but it doesn't come cheap. This is where the good news that God has come to us is very different from most good news. The very nature of the good news calls forth a response from us. Of course, we want to say yes, and beyond this it may call us individually to any number of things. What is involved in your "yes" to the gospel? What does that call you to do?

There can be a lot of answers to that question, probably several answers for every person in this room. And I don't want to stop your thinking about it, but I do want to make a few suggestions about what these texts and the grand jury decisions of the last two weeks seem to me to be asking of us. First, we need to be listening for the gospel in places outside of church and outside of the usual patterns of authority. Like John the Baptizer, the good news may be coming to us from unbeautiful voices, or from dangerous places. And second, as Isaiah is commanded, we must go to work in the wilderness ourselves, to the places of the world's pain and uncertainty, and there lift up our voice with strength, lift it up, and not fear.

The world needs good news right now. Some of us, on a personal level, need good news right now. Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, to Ferguson, to Staten Island, to Cleveland, to Chicago, to Oak Park, to each other. But also, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Comfort, work, and wait.