

Seek to be Found

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a (Series B, 2nd Sunday in Advent) Ps.85:1-2, 813

Mark 1:1-8

Prayer: *For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 40:1-11)*

Preaching has become a dreadful word these days. We no longer wish to be preached to, and we no longer wish for preachers to preach. The church is in trouble, largely because the church doesn't want to **sit** and **listen** to its preachers anymore. There is some amount of cynicism in society today about any thing that has to do with church.

Some of that criticism is rightly earned, I think. Preachers of today tend to take the easy expressway to retirement, a comfortable parish, in a comfortable place. Don't ruffle too many feathers, maintain the status quo, don't dare speak too specifically of sins, and by all means don't do anything to upset the church council and the synodical hierarchy.

We preachers have been slow to take up the itchy camel hair vestments of St. John the Baptist, not to mention his wilderness diet of grasshoppers and wild honey. We have failed to be prophetic preachers, to speak the Word of God at the risk of offending, or making people unhappy or uncomfortable, of calling them out of their comfort zones into the wilderness.

Then again, how many growth-minded congregations put up with a pastor who calls even the most religious to repentance, who has enough courage and conviction to rebuke people for their sins and call them to accountability and bear the fruits of repentance?

Common experience would indicate that if Jesus were called to preach in our churches today, he would be crucified before he could say "**let us pray**". If John the Baptist were called to preach in our churches today, we would packed off him before the end of the service to the Palestine's wilderness.

God sends preachers. God is a sending God, that's his mode of operation. *He sends prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastor-teachers to preach the Word,* to bind up the saints through the work of the ministry, to build up the Church with the Word so that church grows into full maturity in Christ and is not blown around by every tantalizing teaching that whispers sweet nothings into its ears. God sent the prophet Isaiah. He sent John the Baptist.

And when God's preachers submit to preach God's Word, it is the mouth of the Lord that has spoken. That's the Word that the prophet Isaiah is sticking into our ears this morning. *The mouth of the Lord that has spoken.* And wherever Lord speaks, there is life and salvation.

Comfort and Conviction. We have it in the text from Isaiah this morning - a kind of Law sandwich between two slices of Gospel. Gospel, Law, Law, Gospel. From the Lord's mouth comes a comforting Word. "*Comfort, comfort my people,*" says your God. "Speak tenderly, lovingly, speak to the heart of my bride, and preach kind words to her. Comfort her, but don't make her comfortable.

Tell her that she is forgiven." God sends his preachers to preach a comforting Word. He wants to woo His bride to Him with tender words. Her time of hard service has come to an end. Her exile is nearly over. The Day of the Lord is coming soon.

Her sin has been paid for. The Law no longer condemns. She has received from the Lord's hand double for all our sins. Not just enough, but double forgiveness. That's how it is with the Gospel - more forgiveness than we have sin to forgive.

Imagine that. There is no sin so great that Jesus didn't atone for it on the cross. No life so wretched that God could not redeem it. Through Jesus Christ by the spoken Word of forgiveness, the absolution, is extended to all who believe. There is more than enough forgiveness in Jesus to cover them. More than enough forgiveness to comfort others.

Comfort my people, God is telling me to bring you comfort this very moment. To tell you, "Your time of hard service is ended. Your iniquity is forgiven. You have received double for your sins." How can it be? How can we be certain? Because "The mouth of the Lord has spoken."

The voice calls people to prepare. "Prepare the way for the Lord." The terrain will not be left the same after the bulldozers of God's Law have ploughed their path. Every low place will be raised up. Every high place will be laid low. Everyone must become completely other than they are.

The proud and high and mighty, will be brought down. If we are made a mountain of self-righteousness out of your good works and commandment-keeping, the Law will come and push everything over like ten bulldozers.

There is a story about a university professor who went to visit the great master Nan-In one day. "Master", he said – "teach me what I need to know to have a happy life. I have studied the sacred scriptures, I have visited the greatest teachers in the land, but I have not found the answer, please - teach me the way."

At this point Nan-In served tea to his guest. He poured his visitor's cup full and then kept on pouring and pouring so that the tea began to run over the rim of the cup and across the table, and still he poured, until tea was cascading upon the floor.

The professor watched this until he could not longer restrain himself. "It's overfull, stop, no more will go in" he cried out. "Like this cup", Nan-In said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you the way unless you first empty your cup?"

How can we welcome Christ, how can we enter the promised - land with him, if we have no room in our hearts for him, if we are not prepared? John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, not by building a highway in the wilderness of Judea, but by preparing the hearts of all who were willing to hear him and to repent.

John called to the people to hear his message and to take action so that they would be able to greet the Messiah, and walk in his way. The voice calls everyone without exception to repent, to be of changed heart: the religious and the unreligious, the Pharisee and the publican, the good and the bad, the moral and the immoral, those who have already repented and those who think they have need for repentance.

"All people are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field." We are mortal. We die. "From dust you were taken, to dust you will return." That is the fruit of our rebellion, the just wages of our sin is death. That's what we get for being like God instead of being the image of God.

We die - like the grass that is fresh and alive in the morning, and that dries up and dies when the hot desert wind blows over it. Our works and accomplishments are like the flowers of the field. A momentary splash of beauty and color, and then they are gone. So it is with everything that glorifies mankind. "Here today, gone tomorrow."

The great civilizations of ***Egypt, Medo-Persia, Babylon, Greece, Rome*** - all faded and are gone. Their dusty remnants and ruins are left for archaeologists to study and tourists to pose in front of. The great kings have come and gone, and their kingdoms have come and gone with them.

Their achievements are largely forgotten, except by those who enjoy pouring over the dusty pages of history. Revivals and religious movements have raced through our land like wildfire. They too come and they go, as do their prophets, gurus, preachers, and followers.

The question was asked of us last Sunday, "*What do we have in our hands to offer to God, if God were to come out of hiding?*" Don't take my word for it, just visit the nursing home, the oncology ward, a veteran hospital, the cemetery. Take a look in the bathroom mirror and listen to that inner voice saying. "*The grass withers, the flower fades.*"

There is nothing in us, is nothing in our hands that will last - not our good looks, not our strength, not our intelligence, not our achievements. There is nothing in us that we can count on. Only the grace of God, and it is upon His Word which stands for all eternity, and not what we do, that our eternal life rests. Only the Word is sure. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The voice again speaks, now in a shout. *"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, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"*

It is Gospel, good news. And the Gospel is always louder than the Law. The good news is that "God is here in our wilderness." Here in our hearing His Word. Here in the water of Baptism. Here in the Word of Absolution. Here, in humanity. He is here to prepare us for the Day of his coming.

That is the good news which the Church is called to lift up her head and shout to the nations of the earth. Shout it to the cities. Shout it to every person in those cities, high ways and the byways. "Here is your God." He is the Baby of Bethlehem, the Man of Calvary, the crucified, and the risen Lord, all wrap up in one person.

Christmas reaffirms the mystery of human community. Christmas tells us that God loves us so much He has stooped low to make Himself present in all of Human life. He is waiting there to be discovered. But until we have discovered Him in a spouse, in a child, in a parent, in a friend, in a stranger, in an enemy, we have not really discovered His Presence in the world. Christmas is not a promise of continuous entertainment; Christmas is an invitation to discovery.

Christmas is coming! What are you waiting for? He comes as Lord and Yahweh, in the Law and the Gospel. He comes as a gentle Shepherd, a shepherd who feeds His flock, gathers his lambs into his arms, carries them in the fold of his garments, gently leads those who are nursing their young to their pasture.

For those who trust Him, there is nothing to fear of His coming. His coming means salvation and life. We are the people of His pasture, the sheep of His hand. Our Baptism marks us as of His own. He will pick us up and carry us in those arms once extended for us on the cross. He will gently guide us, through life and death to the resurrection to eternal life.

Seek to be Found: Take a breath, open your mind, your heart, and your soul, and turn toward the Light within. As the 2nd Letter to Peter says, *Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation. **Seek with love to be loved as found.***

We can surely trust Him to do this. We have His Word.

"The mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Amen.