

## **“The God Who Sends Good News”**

**Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8**

**A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells**

The title of my message today is “The God Who Sends Good News.” It comes on this Second Sunday of Advent, a season of waiting and watching and preparing our hearts to receive the Good News about Jesus Christ. As we think about the Good News God sends, let’s begin with other senders of good news we’ve experienced in our own lives. Who sends us good news?

- We might think of the sports announcer on TV or radio—or even the app on our cell phone—that tells us our favorite football or basketball team has won. That’s the kind of news we like to get.
- Believe it or not, sometimes our boss at work can be the bearer of good news on those rare occasions when we get called in, or called on the phone, to tell us we have a day off; or even better (and rarer) when they tell us we got the promotion we wanted! That’s certainly good news.
- And then there are times we ourselves can be the senders of good news. I was such a messenger on two occasions in my life when my children were born. I was the one who had the privilege of calling my parents, and Joyce’s parents, to inform them they were grandparents. Now that was really great news, and I was glad to deliver it!

I think all of us have had experiences like this: to be both recipients and deliverers of news we are excited about. And so it is in today’s readings from the Bible. Here we find God as the sender of the Good News—God is coming to save God’s people Israel, to bind up their wounds, and to set them on a path that leads them home to God. But we also find God enlisting others to share this great Good News. We hear this in the reading from the prophet Isaiah, which begins with some words we hear each year at Advent:

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

These are very familiar words to us...too familiar, perhaps...so familiar to our ears that we fail to appreciate the life-giving message they bring. That may have to do with where and when we are hearing this piece of scripture. We receive these words as a people living in North America, in one of the most prosperous nations on earth, in the technologically advanced 21<sup>st</sup> century and, for most all of us, we receive them living within the relative social and economic ease of the middle class.

- From this place, comfort is pretty much all around us.
- Most all of us have what we need—we don’t go hungry, we have a place to live, and we have clothing to keep us warm.
- Most of us, in fact, have more than we need. We have more than the vast majority of people alive in the world today.

We have so much that maybe the words of Isaiah that speak of comfort don’t register with us. So, why was “comfort” the most important word God could speak to God’s people through Isaiah? It was important for Israel to hear because of all that they had suffered. Their story is well known:

- At the time Isaiah spoke, the people of Israel were still in exile, placed there by their own disobedience, according to the prophets.
- Defeated by the Assyrians, conquered by Babylonians, uprooted and moved hundreds of miles from their homeland, the children of Israel felt abandoned, lost, and forlorn.
- They had wept many tears over their plight, tears of sorrow and grief, lamenting their aloneness and feeling of separation from God.
- Through the writings known as Lamentations we hear their cries:
  - o “She [that is, Israel] weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies” (Lamentations 1:2). AND...
  - o “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed” (Lamentations 1:16).

Maybe this can help us understand Israel's dilemma. With no one to comfort or console a people locked away in exile, God's first word to them is the word they have longed to hear: "Comfort, comfort my people."<sup>1</sup>

I don't know that it's possible to hear this word from Isaiah this year and NOT think about the form of exile we are living through. It's hard NOT to think about the pandemic and the way we have been uprooted from our normal ways of life...sent into a pattern of living that is still alien to us...lamenting along the way what we have lost in personal connection and in personal freedom...the inability to see who we want, to give them a hug, to go where we want, when we want... Maybe now, in our time of suffering through a pandemic that has sickened millions and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives...maybe now even we can feel the impact of those words from God: "Comfort, comfort my people."

I need to point out here one distinction between the situation of Israel in exile and our own. I haven't heard this view expressed lately but months ago, when the pandemic first started, there were some Christians who claimed the coronavirus was God's way of punishing us for our sins. Cc I do not believe this is the case.

The pandemic is not God pouring out wrath on the world because of our sinfulness. It is, sadly, a naturally occurring event. It happens when viruses—which have their own role to play in the created order—mutate and take on a more deadly form. The pandemic, like other naturally occurring disasters, is part and parcel of life on Earth. Precisely why God allows such deadly and destructive events is unclear this side of heaven. It remains shrouded in mystery.

God did not direct the coronavirus pandemic to punish us or to make our lives miserable. But, as with other disasters, God works to make something good come out of evil circumstances.

In our own trying circumstances, here is a promise and a hope from God, Pandemics, like exiles, come to an end. They do not last forever. God is at work, unseen by human eyes, to bring about new hope, a new exodus for those who are oppressed. When bad news is all around us, God sends good news to remind us God is still working for us. From Isaiah, the word is this:

God has determined the time to act.  
God is coming to comfort God's people.  
So make a highway for God.  
Make it through the wilderness.  
Make it straight, and level.  
Break down the hills.  
Fill in the valleys.  
And prepare a way for the Lord, who is coming.

And here's something else that's remarkable about the way God works: after speaking words of hope, God calls on the people themselves to take part in sharing the news:

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!" (Isaiah 40:9).

God is coming like a warrior to redeem the defeat of exile. God is coming like a shepherd to comfort God's flock and to care for them.

The Good News is this: God is coming! And this is only just the start. Hundreds of years after Isaiah, the Gospel of Mark starts out with these words:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Now we are getting somewhere. God has decided to act, at the right time, by sending Jesus into the world. And God continues to act in the world through the Church, through the followers of Jesus, through you, and through me. God is not done with us...God is not done with Creation.

And this is incredibly good news to share on this Second Sunday of Advent. The same God who saw the suffering of God's people has acted to save human beings, and all Creation, by sending Jesus, who is the very

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Chan, "Commentary on Isaiah 40:1-11," WorkingPreacher.org, December 6, 2015, article on internet, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11-7>, accessed 1 December 2020.

embodiment of Good News. John the Baptist was the first messenger, the forerunner, the herald, telling us to prepare to receive Jesus Christ. We've heard this word herald before.

A herald is a person with official status who makes announcements on behalf of another. Heralds had the same status as an ambassador...they were official messengers from a king.<sup>2</sup>

So that makes it official! God enlists us, the people who received the good news, to become messengers who carry that news to others. Just as Zion, Jerusalem, received, so too they were sent to be bearers of good news. We are called to be heralds of good tidings—Jesus is coming!

This year, we will sing the songs of Christmas as we rejoice in the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world. One of those songs will be “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” The whole song is a beauty, but the first verse proclaims the Gospel message:

Hark the herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King;  
peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!”  
Joyful, all ye nations rise,  
join the triumph of the skies;  
with the angelic host proclaim,  
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!”<sup>3</sup>

Here is our good news: prepare to receive it, and prepare to proclaim it!

- Let us receive into our hearts once again the love of God that comes to us through Jesus.
- Let us proclaim His coming by being a people who love as God loves through acts of kindness, small and large, and through words of hope that speak the everlasting promise of God: I am with you, I am with you, do not fear but rejoice, for I am with you.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> “herald,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/herald>, accessed 2 December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wesley, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” UM Hymnal, 240.