

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Truth be told, the wilderness is NOT a good place to be – everything wild and beyond your control; covered with thorns and no end of thorny problems; filled with those things that can hurt you and cause you suffering. The wilderness is the place of curse – Eden lost, Paradise forfeit. It’s the place of exile – the place where the enemy surrounds you, desires to rule over you, and brings no end of grief to your life – the place, in fact, where you find yourself toiling day in and day out – it is every day of your life in this fallen world – not some desert in Sinai, not Babylon, but a place of suffering, thorns, and death all the same. For we all live in enemy occupied territory where Satan, the world, and the sinful flesh work together to make life miserable – where we make life hell for ourselves – where sin rages and brings ruin to relationship, marriage, and home; where disaster of every kind gives testimony to a world dying around us; where the pain just keeps getting worse, the plagues keeps coming back, and the wrinkles keep getting deeper and deeper until finally we die. “All flesh is grass,” we are told, “and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades...” (Is 40:6-7). You and I are dying in the wilderness.

Not much comfort in that - no hope, really, *despite* what the present age offers and what your idols have promised. Putting our fear, love, and trust in everything from our skill and determination to our doctors, our technology, even our bank accounts, we may provide ourselves with the delusion of some control, the illusion of peace, perhaps even the hope of some lasting comfort in this world. But a time is coming when our delusions and idols will come tumbling down. And when that time comes - when we finally realize just how helpless we are to quit making life hell for ourselves, just how impotent we are against the forces of chaos and ruin, just how powerless we are against sin and death itself, then we will surely realize there IS no hope for us in this world...

There is hope for us only in Christ - in HIS redemption, in the power of HIS resurrection, in the certainty of HIS promise - the promise that He WILL deliver you from this wilderness to new life in the new heavens and new earth. Jesus has already purchased this deliverance for you, as you know, paying the price for your sin on the cross. Indeed, in Christ, your warfare is ended, your iniquity is pardoned (Isa 40:2). And now you're good to go, because everything God has against you - your sin, your rejection of His Word, your rejection of HIM that brought all this chaos on you in the first place, has been wiped away - The slate is clean. And so there is *great* hope for you - a promise - a Day when everything that is broken will be put behind you.

The problem is, until that day comes, the wait seems long, and the waiting difficult. All the while, the thorns and problems pick away at you, the failures pile up, the chaos and ultimately death itself become overwhelming. Throughout that time, the rescue that God has promised seems all the more distant, all the more uncertain, all the more unlikely. In fact, as the failure and pain and disaster bring with them shame and suffering and fear, we become anxious, angry, and dare I say, forgetful of God's promises. We forget who we are and whose we are, because that's our nature - it's what we do! It is how the sinful, helpless flesh feels and reacts in every time of need - which is why God sends Isaiah. It's the reason He sends John the Baptist. And it is the reason He sends me - to prepare the way in the wilderness - to show you

your helplessness, to call you to repentance, and to speak tenderly of God's promises for you.

In Christ crucified and risen, your warfare is ended - your sins are pardoned, and soon, "The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, *for the mouth of the Lord has spoken*" (Isa 40:5) - God has said so! And He will do what He says: "He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young" (Isa 40:11). "The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved" (2 Peter 3:10), [but] those who trust in Him for His deliverance will be gathered to the new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13), as St. Peter writes. *For thus says the Lord* - NOT wishful thinking, NOT pie-in-the-sky dream, but the sure and certain promise from Him who has created you, sustains you, and will indeed bring all things to perfect completion.

And how will we endure between now and then? How are we to fend off the devil and deal with our anxiety and doubt in this tiresome wilderness? Again, St. Peter provides the answer where he writes, "You ought to be in lives of holiness and godliness" (2 Peter 3:11). Of course, we *have* no holiness and godliness of our own - never have, never will! For God alone is holy. Only God is Godly. And so our holiness and godliness clearly depends on our participation in GOD'S holiness and righteousness, right? To live in holiness and godliness does not suddenly require you to put your fear, love, and trust in your determination to toe the line, walk right, and fly straight. It means you must take your place in communion with God - in Christ - in HIS holiness and righteousness, which is exactly what happens the moment you are Baptized. For in that moment, you are baptized INTO Christ and gathered INTO the presence of God, cleansed - without spot or blemish - clothed in Christ's righteousness, reconciled to God, and made a full partaker of His holiness. There, your warfare came to an end. There, your iniquity was pardoned. There, you received grace, mercy, and peace from God in double proportion for all your sins! And there you will *remain* for as long as you remember your Baptism and hold fast to your place in that blessed communion - in that holiness and godliness that comes from being one with God in Christ - abiding in His Word,

receiving His ongoing nurture, comfort, and peace in His life-giving body and blood, trusting in His promise and living as a new creation as you await that great Day when Christ will come again with might, bringing His reward (Isa 40:10).

And if you should feel angry, anxious, or doubtful, use these cues to turn from your idols, your sins, your false hopes and fleeting comfort, and take your places in this blessed communion where you have everlasting peace. For the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will tend you like a shepherd. He will gather you in His arms; He will carry you in His bosom, and He will deliver you to the new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13) forever.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon Texts: Isaiah

40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8