

2nd Sunday in Advent Sermon

Pastor JoAnn Bunn

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

What a character John the Baptist was. We get to hear about John the 2nd and third Sundays of Advent every year and then again when Jesus is baptized by him. And I love that he was the one who baptized Jesus and therefore we know something now about how important baptism is because it was important for our Lord. And I love that John was our Lord's cousin. But I love something else even more. I love what John wore! I know! That is so superficial of me! I can't help it. From the time I first heard about John in Sunday School when I was a kid and even now as an old gray headed pastor, it just cracks me up, and makes John all the more dear to me when I hear that what he wore made him so different from everybody else. So different, that the Gospels have to talk about what he wore and what he ate. Camel's hair and a leather belt and he ate locusts-ick- and wild honey. John was a real back to nature nut, wasn't he? You know I have some back to nature nuts in my family, big time hikers and campers, even liking to tent camp in the wilderness, (so to speak). But most of them like to wear Patagonia and North face and Yeti, not one of them has asked for anything made out of camel's hair for Christmas.

So I love John because he was so different from anybody else I've ever read about. And you know, for some reason, there was also something about him that attracted people back then too. Somehow he must have been preaching a word that people needed. He must have been promising something that people weren't getting from the spiritual guidance they were used to. People came out of the city in droves, by the dozens, by the hundreds to hear what John was saying. And what John was saying was for them to get ready, that something big was getting ready to happen. And John said that he was only a part of the big thing that was going to happen because it was his job to tell everybody to start getting ready. John wanted people to get their hearts ready for the coming of the One whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. Part of the getting ready was repenting. Repenting. Too often we think about repenting as saying we're sorry. And that is part of it. But the word "repent" actually means to turn around. To stop where we are, realizing that the direction we are headed is off course for where we need and hope to be going. So John says we need to repent, to turn around and head the other way. That is a part of preparing that John says we need to do to be ready for the coming big event.

In our old testament lesson today Isaiah is also talking about getting ready. What he is talking about sounds something like this huge building project, straightening out the curvy roads, leveling off the mountains and dumping all that extra dirt down in the valleys. Straightening out, leveling off. Can you imagine what the poor Vdot folks would do if they were given such an assignment? But Isaiah wasn't talking literally about a huge new infrastructure program. He was just like John, talking about getting ready because something big is about to happen.

And listen to the words Isaiah uses. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" he says. Those are the words God has told the prophet to declare to the people. God has decided the people's punishment has gone on long enough, our first lesson says. These words were written originally in Isaiah because the Jewish people had been in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. Isaiah was able to bring the words of God to the Jewish people, that after all that time they were going to be able to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild their home, to rebuild their city, to rebuild their temple.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. What a wonderful word for the people to hear from the prophet. God is going to let you go home, back to your homeland.

Our words in the Gospel from Mark today are at the very beginning of his Gospel. In fact that's what Mark says. He says that what he is telling us today is the BEGINNING of the Good News of Jesus Christ. And then Mark, hundreds of years after Isaiah had written them, tells us about John, using the same words. He takes those words and says that John, out in the wilderness is the one Isaiah was talking about when he said prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. But Mark is also not talking about some huge road construction project. He is talking about this repentance changing things inside us, changing things around in our hearts, that with repentance, our priorities will get changed around, that kindness and compassion become the way of the day. We might even say that with this leveling off of things, the wealthy get

taken down a few notches so that the poorest have what they need. These kinds of things are the things the Gospel of Mark talks about when John the Baptist came to help the people get prepared. And Mark got those words from way back in the Old Testament. He tells that those words were written about John getting ready, but they come from the book of Isaiah 500 years before John and Jesus were born.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says God. What a message for Isaiah's day as the people were getting ready to leave a 70 year captivity and go back to their beloved homes.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, we are told about the beginning of John's ministry as he is telling people to prepare for one who is coming who will bring comfort to them.

And for that matter, comfort ye, comfort ye, my people says our God now. It hasn't been 500 years and it hasn't even been 70 years. Its only been 9 months. But ITS BEEN 9 MONTHS!! And we are weary. Weary of it all. I remember not that long ago I watched the Covid numbers, but there was no one in Southwest VA infected with covid. Then a few trickled in. And I remember the first ones who were even related to someone I knew. And then as the case count grew,

I knew people with covid and even people who died with covid. And then two of my elderly members here at Gladesboro got Covid in the same nursing facility and I conducted funerals for Shelby and Roddie, folks I have known all my life. Their funerals were on the same day. And with those deaths the reality and seriousness of covid became more personal.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people says our God. We need his comfort now. We are weary. Weary of people we know being sick. We are weary of deaths of those we know and even those we love. We are weary of not getting to see grandchildren, of not being able to be with our families because its not safe. We are weary of wearing masks and washing hands. [Oh, by the way, you all might not all know. But if you say the Lord's Prayer while you are washing your hands that will be the right amount of time. I'll bet you all have been singing Happy birthday instead and you are weary of that, too. At least this will give you another way to be sure you wash your hands long enough. And you get in an extra prayer and get to talk with God on top of being safe.] But we are weary of it all. Covid weary.

We hear that a vaccine is coming, and this brings us hope. There are still some questions. Will it be safe? How soon can we get it? And, how long before we covid weary people can feel more safe and confident again? How soon will God's comfort come to our lives.

By the way, we have been praying weekly in our worship here at Gladesboro for a vaccine. And I have no doubt that God has been working through the hearts and the minds and the dedication of the scientists and technicians who are working to develop vaccines, as he continues to work through the hearts and the hands of the nurses and doctors who are on the job 24/7. Yes, we think of the vaccine as developed by science, and not religion. But this is where the two cross over into each other. ALL GOOD THINGS come from God. And we give thanks for the inspiration, for the knowledge he has given, and for the strength for long hours he has blessed folks with to allow vaccines to be created. His finger is in all of it.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people says our God. It was first said by Isaiah some 500 years before Christ's birth. Something big was about to happen. The people were being allowed to go home.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people says our God. During Advent this wild and wooly John out in the wilderness comes to us with the message that something big is going to happen, that we need to get ourselves prepared, get our hearts ready for the coming, start getting our priorities in the right order. The one who will bring comfort is coming and we need to be ready.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people. Come to us Lord and comfort us covid weary people. Comfort and heal those with this disease. Comfort those who have lost loved ones. Comfort families and friends of those suffering now, and those who are fearful. Comfort those who are away from family in this holiday season. May the vaccines work as well as promised. May they be distributed quickly, fairly, and safely. Comfort all of us, Lord, as you blessed the people of old, and prepare us anew for the big event which is coming for us, the coming of our Lord into our world and into our lives. AMEN

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak 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.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every 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. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All

people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get 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!" ¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He 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

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

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."