

Isaiah 40:1-8; Mark 1:1-15

“Prepare the Way”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Advent reminds us that the promise of the Messiah began long before Jesus’ birth. The promise of the Messiah began with God’s word spoken by the prophets. Through scripture and hymnody, today’s service of Lessons and Carols remembers God’s promises spoken through the prophets.

Yet these prophets continue to speak to us today. Amid today’s stark divisions and wars, its hopes and longings, the prophet Isaiah continues to encourage us, our Jewish sisters and brothers, and all humanity. Isaiah’s words, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,*” continue to offer hope to humanity. “*Comfort, comfort my people,*” are words that “*prepare the way*” for a message of hope and comfort that this world dearly needs to hear. This message is for all who know only division, strife, and war; for all who are troubled of heart; for all who mourn; for all who are oppressed; and for all who are ill and seek healing. Isaiah’s words give hope for all seeking reconciliation with others and with God. The Advent message “*prepare the way*” urges us to look for the Holy Comforter, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, Jesus the Christ.

Advent is the start of a new church year, preparing our hearts for the work God would have us do in this coming year. Christ lives raised and alive and will dwell in any heart that welcomes him. Advent is meant to help us speak, like Isaiah, words of comfort to God’s people.

Contrary to the materialism and even at times, cultural emptiness of this season, Advent is a reminder that Isaiah’s prophecy is still alive and open for anyone to call upon today. “*A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’*” Long after the decorations are put away until next year, the work of preparing the way of the Lord continues each day.

Isaiah’s words tower over our culture of self-achievement and material success. Isaiah is insistent that “*the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain.*” In other words, all people shall stand equally before God as one people, equal in their common humanity before God and one another. As saints and sinners, we stand together, forgiven by God.

This is not only our hope for the future, but also our present reality in Christ. To not see that my neighbor’s forgiveness is the same as mine, is to miss the reality of God’s forgiveness. I cannot grasp my own forgiveness without giving thanks for and helping my neighbor in need. Isaiah’s

message is about life's mountains, valleys, and highways being made level and straight.

For many of us, Isaiah's use of the word "wilderness" has lost its original meaning, and yet this is precisely where Isaiah calls us to prepare the way of the Lord – in the wilderness. For Isaiah, the wilderness is the place of God's presence. The wilderness is where God walked with and led Israel; it is the place where Elijah ran for his life, meeting God in stillness. The wilderness is that place of need where God encounters us with the grace of strength and hope.

Perhaps many of us don't think of modern urban life as a wilderness. Surrounded by great material wealth, we suffer very few true inconveniences. Comparatively speaking, we enjoy mountains of material benefits, medical advances, comforts, and security that kings and queens of antiquity simply did not know. In our upwardly mobile and success-oriented culture, we seem to have more and more material things while feeling less and less spiritually comfortable with life.

Yet there are also many in our world who do not have access to these mountains of comfort. Standing in valleys of true want and despair, many have truly very little. We see these sisters and brothers everywhere, not only at this time of the year, but throughout the year – standing at intersections, in shopping center parking lots, at the exits of expressways. To those not only on the mountains, but also in the valleys, Isaiah's promise is spoken: *"the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain."* Advent is a call to prepare a way in the wilderness for the Lord so all people might know the comfort of God's grace.

Grace allows us to see ourselves and our neighbor as forgiven and loved by God. Isaiah emphasizes our being bounded by time and space that we have not created. Isaiah writes, *"All people are grass...the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."* God's grace is the great leveler of space and time that all human beings stand in need of.

Humanity teeters between the belief that given enough time and resources we can solve nearly any problem and the reality of our unyielding cruelty to one another. At moments, so great is our confidence in progress, we seem to have "come of age," no longer needing God. While at other moments, we use science and technology to destroy one another and God's creation. *"The grass withers, the flower fades,"* and our lives remain bounded by space, time, and mortality.

Advent is a call to lift our eyes toward the coming Messiah. Advent is a moment to again realize our utter need of grace and so prepare a way for the Lord in the wilderness of our lives and this world. Aiming at us, Isaiah writes, *"A voice says, 'Cry out!'"* We are the ones who are to cry out, preparing the way of the Lord. We are to be like John the Baptist pointing beyond ourselves

to the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

In our culture of individuality and individual greatness how many can humbly point beyond themselves to someone who is greater than themselves? How many see that true greatness comes in serving rather than in being served?

*“A voice says, “Cry out!” And so, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, and saying “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”*

Jesus proclaims good news and the nearness of the kingdom through you. His way is easy; on it we find all nations and people. It is the way to the kingdom of God.

If Advent is truly to have meaning, we must cry out with this good news for ourselves, for our neighbor, for our enemy, and for all in need.

Prepare the way in the wilderness. The Messiah comes. Amen.