

The Pathway to Peace
Isaiah 40:1-11
Second Sunday in Advent
December 7, 2014

Introduction – Peace in a Troubled World

We live in a troubled world. You don't need me to tell you that. Just read the newspaper headlines, surf the net, or watch the evening news. Two weeks ago, when I was in Kenya, Islamic terrorists hijacked a bus near Somalia, quizzed them on their knowledge of the Koran and executed 28 people who weren't Muslims. In this country, about the same time, protesters raised a cry and rioters brought havoc to cities across this land over the tragic case of Michael Brown and Officer Darren Wilson. Around the world, Russia is on the move in Ukraine and elsewhere. ISIS is still on its murderous path. North Korea is engaging in cyber-warfare. All of the tragic news of the world is so commonplace that our sympathies become callous and our eyes just glaze over at the endless reports of war and unrest.

But the lack of peace hits close to home, too. Those problems are impossible to ignore. I personally know of at least three marriages today that are in serious crisis, very possibly leading to the disaster and disruption of divorce. Grown parents and siblings don't get along and the holiday celebrations during this time of the year only seem to magnify the heartache. People have financial woes that keep them up at night and health concerns that darken their future. And, of course, not many of us can escape personality conflicts that constantly challenge us at work, school, or in the community.

In a season that is supposed to promote peace and goodwill, it seems we have very little of either. At the risk of sounding a little glib – but in all seriousness – “there's an app for that.” It's not a little icon that you can put on your smart phone. It's the Gospel and it's found in the Bible.

Good News for a Troubled People – Isa. 40:1-11

I have always loved the Old Testament prophetic books. And of all of the prophetic books, Isaiah uses the most refined and exalted language to express the grandeur of God. Nearly all of the prophets follow the same pattern. The first half of the book is filled with terrifying

judgments while the closing chapters reflect the mercy and grace of God. Most of the time, we skip over the judgments of the first part of the books and emphasize the good news of God's mercy and grace. But without understanding the holiness, justice, and righteousness of God that is emphasized in the judgments, we short-change the greatness of his goodness. *God's righteous judgments magnify his grace and mercy.*

And that is certainly the case with our text this morning. Isaiah ministered and delivered these prophecies nearly 150 years before God's judgment would be delivered to Judah through their defeat and deportation to Babylon. Most of the material in Isaiah's book that precedes Chapter 40 is predictions of the downfall of nations, including God's own people. One hundred and fifty years later, as the Jews were dejected in their seventy year exile, these words of the prophet would have brought real hope and comfort to them. They had been severely disciplined by God for their idolatry. The opening words to this passage would have a soothing relief to their national wound:

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,*

"Comfort...Speak tenderly." The words express the deep affection that God has for his people. Though his discipline may be severe, his love and grace will always meet his judgment. God judged his people because of their sin. Now, he declares that atonement has been made – the price has been paid and there is no more debt to be serviced.

*...her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

With sins atoned for, the good news is then boldly announced:

*A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every 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.
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

Babylon had made Judah a wilderness through their destructive onslaught. But God was returning to his people. The King was coming and a highway needed to be prepared for him. This is the stuff of engineers. Mountains and hills would be leveled; gullies and valleys would be raised for the King's highway. Jesus taught and the gospels described the obvious spiritual application: the proud would be humbled and the poor and meek would be exalted. (“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” James 4:6.) The New Testament tells us that this engineering work of spiritual preparation would be the work John the Baptist who preached repentance for the coming Kingdom of God. Luke's gospel tells us:

*And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet...*

Luke 3:3-4

And Jesus would be the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's words for,

*..the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the
only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14

Do you doubt God? In the midst of all your troubles, does his promise sometimes seem impossible? Certainly, as the Jews languished in exile, they must have doubted that God could accomplish his word. Virtually all of Chapter 40 addresses our small view of God and resultant lack of faith, but the prophet lays the foundation of his message in the next verses:

*A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades*

*when the breath of the Lord blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

“...the word of our God will stand forever.” God’s word to disheartened people living in captivity is “you can trust me.” People have heard all kinds of promises. Many have been worthless – causing hearts to grow cynical and calloused. All of man’s promises will fade away. But God’s word will stand forever. You can count on it.

And here is God’s bold word to His people in captivity:

*Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
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.*

The Messiah would bring both justice and mercy and this prophesy is uniquely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Earlier in Isaiah’s book, he had declared:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;*

*those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
 on them has light shone.
 ...For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given;
 and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
 and his name shall be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Isa. 9:2, 6

Charles Wesley described him this way:

*Israel's strength and consolation,
 Hope of all the earth Thou art;
 Dear Desire of ev'ry nation,
 Joy of ev'ry longing heart.*

Good News for You

Let's be honest. If you're alive, you've probably got problems – your own personal exile in a place you never wanted to be. I don't need to pry. It could be a financial thing, a relationship thing, a career thing...any number of problems that you might be carrying. Today, just as there was good news for the ancient Jews in exile, there is good news for you as well. But there's a catch.

In the Advent story and in our text today, John the Baptist came before Jesus. May I suggest, before you get to Bethlehem, you've got to go to the Jordan River where John the Baptist is preaching repentance for the Kingdom of God. That's why the journey of Advent is so helpful. We want to get to Bethlehem and hear the angels sing and watch the shepherds and wise men bow in worship. All in good time. First, we need to prepare our hearts.

You see, John the Baptist helps us to prepare a highway to our heart for the Shepherd of our soul. It is a highway of humility and hope. It is, as John put it, the roadway of repentance - the only pathway to true peace.

The Only Path to Peace

Repentance is turning from our own pathway to travel on God's highway. It is a reversal in the way we think, our attitudes, and our behavior. Repentance is realignment of our lives with God's purpose and plan for us. Everything else is fighting God. Everything else results in anxiety and disharmony. Repentance - alignment with God - is the only way to peace in your life. In the big picture, it is the only pathway of lasting peace for our nation – for our world.

Why do we fight with God? Is it stubbornness? A lack of faith? Probably that and more. But we're fools. We'd rather live in our own miserable little exile than embrace the promise of God. I remember many years ago speaking with my mom. She did have challenges. My dad's job would change just about every five years and we would have to move. We lived near White Sands, New Mexico for a number of years and then my dad got transferred to the coast of California. For five years, my mom had a nice house on the beach. And then my dad got transferred to the desert again. My mom fought and fought against that. It was a very difficult season in her life and in their marriage. I've always had a good relationship with my mom and even though I was only a freshman in college, we were able to have deep spiritual conversations. She deeply resented God for bringing her back to the desert. She hated it. The more she hated it, the more miserable she was. I suggested to my mom that if she stopped fighting God and accepted what he had brought about in her life that he might indeed move her out of the desert. Well, I don't know if she really listened to me, but there was a transformation that began to take place in her heart. I do believe that she finally accepted God's plans for her. I observed a deeper level of peace in her life. Two years later, they moved to the San Francisco Bay area.

I've got my own stories, too. It could be a big thing, or it may be a relatively small thing. But if you are fighting God and not embracing his work in your life, you will not have any peace at all. It wasn't too long ago that I stopped fighting and handed circumstances in my life over to God. I repented. I realigned my life with God's path for me. The circumstances might not have resolved, but that was God's deal, not mine. In place of my grasping for control, God gave me peace.

Our mission at First Baptist is to help people find and follow Jesus. This message speaks to the very heart of what it means to follow Jesus. God's word is speaking to everyone in this room this morning. I'm talking to believers as well as unbelievers. We often think that repentance is only a matter for unbelievers – that once we receive Christ into our heart, we no longer need to repent and change. Not so. For believers, repentance should be an ongoing practice in your life. Even when you grow in obedience and holiness, God begins to show you areas of your life that need alignment with him. At least, that has been my experience and that of Christ-followers down through the ages. No matter who you are, until you repent, give control of your life over to God, and align your belief, attitude, and behavior with God's plan, you will never have peace.

If you're fighting with God over any issue – big or small - I've got a message for you this morning: "Stop it!" Christian, hear me! Repent and give that part of your life over to God. Be specific in the area of your life that you have been reluctant to give God control. This is the true meaning of Advent – to prepare and renew your heart so that Jesus can make his home there.

Lighting of the Advent Candles: (Enesi and Keisha Momoh)

[As someone lights the second purple candle, the following should be read or paraphrased.]
We light this candle because, like God's people centuries ago, we also need a Savior who will forgive our sins. The purple color reminds us of the seriousness of our sin and our great need for God's forgiveness.

Prayer of Hope

Dear God, as we light this candle, we recognize our sin and our need for a savior. We wait for your forgiveness in Christ. We long to be purified so that we might present ourselves to you in righteousness. Come, Our Savior! Amen!

One of my favorite things to do during this time of the year is to listen to Handel's *Messiah*. The setting of this text in the oratorio is a most appropriate way to end this message. The lyrics link the comforting assurance of Isaiah's promise to the open invitation that Jesus gives to each one of us who are burdened by the troubles of life:

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Isaiah 40:11

Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take His yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Matthew 11:28-29