

Prepare the way*Isaiah 40:1-11*

How many of you were up at around 4.15am on Friday morning, wondering if Edinburgh was under attack, or if the end of the world was nigh? We know now that the tremendous flashes of lightning that certainly woke me up, and then the deafening cracks of thunder, were in fact a relatively rare meteorological phenomenon called 'thundersnow'. I suppose I was a little relieved that it wasn't the end of the world, though had it been, I wouldn't have had to write this sermon, and all the questions we might have had about God, or Jesus, or good and evil, suffering and hope might have been answered by now.

But no, just thunder and lightning mixed with snow, and here we all are, with the prophet Isaiah, this week in a more pastoral mood.

For the first words he tells us God says to His people is 'Comfort.' "Comfort, comfort my people." In these difficult times, to hear of God's comfort not once, but twice is powerfully reassuring. Last week a colleague of mine, who also lives alone, wrote publicly about her sense of isolation. Yes there were Zoom meetings and Teams meetings, and coffee at a distance and services, but it's been nine and a half months since she touched anyone. I suspect that's true for many of us. God says, 'Comfort'.

And God says, 'Comfort', not only to the lost and the lonely and the hurting, the untouching and the untouchable, God says, 'Comfort' to the guilty and the fearful. After the finger-pointing of last week, and the call to turn around and to repent, God says today, 'Comfort'.

As a mother or father gathers up a hurting child, so God gathers up all of us, to reassure, to still, to bring us to peace. This is not bad news, it is good. Some people have said that the Book of Isaiah is a fifth gospel. It speaks good news to God's people. "Disasters make people numb, afraid, hopeless. They undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure...The exquisite poetry...emerges...like a healing, life-creating song. It seeks to bring back to life a people crushed under a shroud of death."ⁱ

It is astonishing that someone writing around two and a half thousand years ago, in a very different time and context, could speak so powerfully to us, to our world, today. 'Comfort.' I see it, I hear it, I feel it like God's two hands coming down on our shoulders, to steady us, to warm us, and then and only then, to begin to move us.

Because God wants us to move out of the darkness, and into the light. Out of the desert, and into the place of abundance. Out of the despair and the isolation, and into community, and hope.

It made me think how often God's people, as a group, or as an individual, start in the desert and in the wilderness, and on to a place of hope. We move out of the captivity of despair, and into the hope of the presence of God.

Last week, in one of the many Zoom meetings I attended, I was taken back to the River Jordan, and to the baptismal site of Jesus. At that point, not far from Jericho and the Dead Sea, the river runs through a wilderness. I was there nearly three years ago. After the Six Days War in 1967 the border between the West Bank of Israel-Palestine and Jordan was heavily mined. This included the churches and compounds of eight Christian denominations. For over five decades no worshippers could enter the churches and the buildings have slowly decayed. I remember seeing some of the mines sticking out of the ground, and the trip wires across the doorways of the churches. You could see in some churches the Bibles left on holy tables, the wind blowing through their pages. God's word still being fanned into that arid and explosive desert, but with none to hear them.

When the clergy had been forced to flee, even though the doors to their churches were not locked, they took with them the keys. And the keys will now be put back into the doors, to keep them open for the returning worshippers. In that great Advent hymn we didn't get to sing in full last Sunday, there is that verse:

*O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.*

Advent is a time of keys, and a time of opening doors, and of pathways made safe. A way in the wilderness, and through the wilderness, is to be prepared, for God, Who is with the people of God. The rocks and boulders, the barriers and restrictions, will be removed and flattened and smoothed away. What was held up, what had been stopped, what had been impeded, will now be able to roll onward into the future, and into peace. To the battered, abandoned community of Israel, in their Babylonian exile, and to our battered, isolated community today, Covid bound, God comes near, to travel along the way that is prepared through the wilderness and out of the desert. To the powerful today, to the privileged today, to those who up until Covid lived with the illusion of control over their circumstances, the message is the same as it is to those who are powerless, and an underclass, and poor. The blocked desert, the crooked highway, will be unblocked and straightened out, and made an even playing ground, and smoothed out. That's the gospel, the good news message of this passage. It is enshrined in the words, 'shall', and 'will'. God's intention, alongside God's people, is to make these things happen. The inequalities and the injustices are going to be dealt with, again, and again if need be. The doors that have locked us in will be open. The ways that were blocked will be prepared, and we shall, will walk in freedom with God again. Free from the masks, and the hand gel. Free from the limited numbers, and the restricted service. Free from the fear of a virus, and the isolation, and the pressure, and the grief and the frustration that has affected every single one of us. "Prepare the way..." Whose way? The Lord's way.

This is what God is promising, then and now, and again in times to come. This is the hope to which we are called. "A hope that works hard in the wilderness to prepare the way."ⁱⁱ

Here is God's fierce compassion for the hurting people today. It is a compassion that comforts, and then prepares the way to hope.

Pope Francis used to give me red socks; he's now given me, and the world, his new book. It's called, *Let us Dream. The Path to a Better Future*. Writing about the time we are living through, he writes that this is a time to see, a time to choose, and then a time to act. He writes:

"I see this time as a reckoning...Your categories and ways of thinking get shaken up; your priorities and lifestyles are challenged...The basic rule of a crisis is that you don't come out of it

the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same...In the trials of life, you reveal your own heart...The state of our hearts is exposed...This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities – what we value, what we want, what we seek...What I hear at the moment is similar to what Isaiah hears God saying through him: Come, let us talk this over. Let us dare to dream.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is a time to dream, in whatever wilderness we find ourselves. Advent tells us not only about the imminent breaking into our world and our personal lives by the Christ-Child, but also of what lies beyond that. Beyond the desert days, a voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way’, will walk with us along that way. Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” The Way. It’s what the first Christians, called themselves, before they were called Christians, they were the people of ‘The Way’.

‘The Way’, to my mind, speaks of movement. What good is a road if it is not travelled along? Today, in Advent, we are called to journey along the way that has been prepared. To move, even tentatively. Like the running shepherds, along what paths; like the journeying wise men, along what roads; like the shining star, through heaven itself. Prepare the way, and Jesus says, ‘Follow’. Shall we go, ready to act for a better world, and daring to dream.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Cynthia A Jarvis, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, p27

ⁱⁱ George W Stroup, *ibid*, p30

ⁱⁱⁱ Pope Francis, Let us Dream. The Path to a Better Future, pps1-7