

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2020 – SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV) God's People Are Comforted

¹Comfort, 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.

Comfort is a most needed theme for this second Sunday in Advent, because not everyone will be full of cheer this Christmas. For many different reasons, Christmas – and especially this Christmas – will be a time when depression will be at its peak for many people.

These were tremendous words of hope for Jews who were living in exile. They are also tremendous words of hope for us, who are living with a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, racial strife, and political unrest.

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.

We who live in the desert should be able to identify with many of the images in the Bible.

We who live in the Sonoran Desert, with all of the dips in the roads, should be able to relate to filling in the low spots so that we can travel across the land.

God is building a highway over which the Jews could travel through the wilderness of exile in Babylon back to their homes. And He is building a highway so that we can make it through all of the ups and downs and sharp curves and detours of life.

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!”

Every time you are hurting, grieving, lonely, in pain, and/or need comfort, look in the manger. Here is your God!

Psalms 85:1-2 (NRSV) Prayer for the Restoration of God's Favor

¹LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

²You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin.

⁸Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people.

⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV) The Proclamation of John the Baptist

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

All four Gospels spend quite a bit of time and a high percentage of their total length covering the arrest, trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Only Matthew and Luke talk about the birth of Jesus.

Luke includes the appearance of the angel to Mary; Matthew includes the appearance of the angel to Joseph. Luke includes the visit of the shepherds the night that Jesus was born; Matthew includes the visit of the wisemen sometime later.

Mark begins with Jesus full grown – at the age of thirty – being baptized by John.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Mark clearly identifies the ministry of John with the words of Isaiah 40.

The Qumran community also identified its mission in terms of Isaiah 40.

Map showing location of Qumran vs. traditional site of Jesus’ baptism.

Pictures of excavations at Qumran, caves, Shrine of the Book, Isaiah scroll.

Bob Rognlien, Recovering the Way, (p. 77)

If John were a part of the Qumran community at some point, it is easy to see why he would have left or been expelled given the differences between their theology and methodology.

While the Essenes withdrew into the desert as an elite band to remove themselves from a corrupt world, John called people of all walks of life to join him in the desert.

While writers of the scrolls anticipated two Messiahs, John was preparing the way for just one.

While those at Qumran practiced ritual bathing to sustain an external purity, John invited people into a one-time immersion as a sign of an internal reorientation he described with the admonition “repent.”

While the Essenes believed that God had long ago determined who would be the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, John earnestly called everyone to prepare their hearts to recognize and receive the Messiah and so become part of God’s coming kingdom.

While the Qumran community was preparing for a military battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, led by a royal Messiah and a priestly Messiah, John looked at Jesus and declared, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1: 29)

Not only was John prophetically recognizing that Jesus would conquer by laying down his life as a sacrificial offering, but he was also proclaiming that this transformational victory would be available to all people, not just a predetermined select few.

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵And 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.

⁷(John) proclaimed, ⁸“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”