

The Sunday of Peace: "Comfort My People" Based on Isaiah 40: 1-11 and Mark 1: 1-8

Today's Gospel reading is the opening verses of Mark. Mark by the way is the oldest of the 4 gospels of the NT, and is the basis for the writers who wrote the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. The writer of Mark gets straight to the point as he starts his book, none of the embellishments which the other gospel writers later include—Luke's birth stories introducing Jesus, or Matthew's lengthy genealogical lineages. Mark takes a "just the facts ma'am" approach: "This is the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (and) it began just as God had said in the book written by Isaiah the prophet." (Mk 1.1 CEV)

And then he paraphrases, from the book of Isaiah, the very verses we heard today. Did you catch that? The opening of Mark's gospel, the story of Jesus the Christ, according to Mark begins by quoting verses from Isaiah. Why did Mark choose these particular verses from Isaiah as way of introducing Jesus the Christ, the Son of God? Well, we need a bit of a history lesson to understand today what the primarily Jewish audience of Mark would have already known from their knowledge of the times of Isaiah. The part of Isaiah from which this excerpt is taken, sometimes called Second Isaiah, is written in the time after the conquest of the Israelites by the Babylonians, and of their return some 50 years or so later or back to Judah after the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. If you were here last week, I briefly touched on this, but today it's worth going into a bit more detail to fully appreciate this. It's hard to over-emphasize the importance of this part of history's impact on the Jewish people, and hence the importance of it to our understanding of the role of Jesus as Messiah, the Saviour. So today, a history lesson!

The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, and the beautiful temple of King Solomon in 587 BCE, and they enslaved many people and took them to Babylon. The Hebrew people were conquered and in exile, and according to the writings of early Isaiah, this was perceived to be a punishment from God, because the people had become greedy, selfish, no longer following the ways of the covenant that they had with the God of their ancestors, and they were no longer worshiping God. They had abandoned their sacred trust, to care for the poor and marginalized—people who could not care for themselves. The writings later in the book of Isaiah deal primarily with the prophet's message from God to a people returning to their homeland, after enduring the trials and difficulties of being an enslaved people -- exiled from their homeland, their faith, and their God—remember these are people who were exiled from their promised land, the homeland that God had led them to. They were unable to worship in a foreign land that had no Temple, because for Jews, the Temple was God's House. If there was no Temple, then where was God? And now they were again enslaved, like they had been enslaved before by the Egyptians, and this time by the Babylonians and they were living in horrid conditions. The Babylonians were a brutal bunch. They felt like God had abandoned them and was punishing them, and using the Babylonians to do that. But now it seemed God had used the Persians to release them from that punishment, they could go home! The journey from Judah to Babylon was a rough and long winding route—on foot, through desert terrain, winding, so as to avoid the worst hazards in that Arabian desert. And the journey back home would be just as long, rough, winding and difficult!

The message from second Isaiah? Words of comfort to the exiled people, the voice of God is calling them back, commanding them back. I have not abandoned you, God tells them through the prophet. God wants them back, doesn't matter that their ways had caused the Babylonian conquest, doesn't matter what caused the brokenness, the reason they were exiled from God. God says through Isaiah. "Comfort my people ... Comfort them! Encourage the people of Jerusalem. Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven. A voice cries out: "Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God!" (Isa 40: 1-3 GN) Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level.... Similar I imagine to what it must have been like after the first highways around here were built, instead of rutted cart tracks and corduroy roadways around rocks and stumps and swamps. It's like God saying to them through Isaiah: Whatever it takes to bring

them back to me, we'll straighten it out, make the way easier. Like God's bringing in the road graders and earth movers to create a new and direct way, to Jerusalem and back to God.

And this is the memory Mark is giving to his listeners, this is what Mark is evoking to the people of his times, the message of 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." (Mark 1: 2 NRSV)

Who is this messenger that's going to create this direct way to God, this direct line to God, this voice crying out of the wilderness? John the Baptist, he will pave the way for the Christ, the messiah, the Son of God. God is the destination and the way to God is through Jesus and John the Baptist is the road maker who will pave the highway that will lead us to Jesus. And highways go in both directions, don't they? On this same highway Jesus can come to us to!

This is another message for advent, the season we celebrate Jesus' coming to be among us. And the good news is that Jesus still comes to God's people. Like the people in the time of Isaiah's writings were called out of exile and back to their home with God, Jesus calls us to come home to him, calling us out of whatever we've done to exile ourselves – distance ourselves from receiving the love of Jesus in our lives. And more good news, that whatever it was, whatever it is, that is distancing us from God's grace, when we give it to God, confess it as a sin, cause that's what sin it, those things that distance us from God's love, when we honestly confess them, we are forgiven.

That's why Jesus came to us in the first place, to forgive our sins and save us from them, and that's why Jesus and still comes to us again, and again, and again. Amen.

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