

You have an invitation before you today to be light in the darkness. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

Today's lesson from Isaiah is one of hope and poetry. When I hear the opening lines, Comfort, O Comfort my people, and think of Handel's Messiah. The phrase summons memories of previous Advent and Christmas seasons for me, of hearing and singing the Messiah, and it quickly puts me in the mood of the season. The passage's real beauty, though, lies in understanding the context in which it was written.

Israel had been in exile in Babylon for more than 50 years because the Babylonians had conquered Israel and sent Israel away from its promised land of Jerusalem. In Babylon, the Israelites were forced to work and live and worship in a foreign land. 50 years at that time was several generations. Most people alive were living through the stories of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, and had not actually lived there. Still, they longed to go home again, and to be free of the oppression of Babylonian rule.

The first section of the book of Isaiah, leading up to today's reading, makes clear that the people had been unfaithful to God, and this harsh exile was a result of their unfaithfulness. But in this second section of Isaiah, beginning with today's reading, God has forgiven the people. They have suffered long enough, have lived out the consequences of their unfaithfulness, and God is preparing to do something new. Speaking to the heavenly counsel, God declares that this new word is to be "Comfort." "*Speak 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.*" It is a new word that the Lord is speaking, not because of the faithfulness of the people, but because of God's faithfulness. Unlike the people, God's word will not fade like the grass, but is a permanent fixture in the lives of God's people. And God will care for them as a shepherd cares for sheep, gathering and carrying the lambs and gently leading the mother sheep.

The Bible, both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, uses the analogy of shepherd and sheep to describe our relationship with God. From imagery in the psalms - the 23rd Psalm is the most well-known - to the Gospels - in which Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, who comes that we might have life and have it more abundantly - God's care is described as that of a shepherd who loves her sheep.

Mark begins his Gospel account by harkening back to this Isaiah passage, full of the imagery of God preparing a way for God's people, and reaffirming a permanent relationship between them, as of a shepherd to his sheep. Mark is letting us know that John the Baptist is laying the pathway for the One who will come after him, Jesus, the One who will offer comfort and hope, and who will be our shepherd. Not just any shepherd, but a good shepherd. Like the prophets before him, John the Baptist declares

the need for repentance, and he adds that a baptism of the Holy Spirit will be offered by Jesus.

It is the second Sunday of Advent. During Advent, we are called to a different path than what we see around us. False promises and guarantees for happiness and comfort are endless - just buy this or that, and you'll know true peace. Be on this side of the political spectrum if you want to know the real truth. If we use the analogy of sheep who belong to the Good Shepherd, we are tempted on every side to look for an opening in the fence, to seek greener pastures, to believe that another shepherd really knows us better and can give us what we want more successfully. This ideology or that ideology will show us the true path. Or, perhaps we're tempted by messages that tell us that we really don't need a shepherd. But, like sheep, who are poor guardians of their own safety and well-being, if left to our own devices, like untended sheep we will ruin the land, muddy the water, fight with one another, or be devoured by predators. The call of Advent is to stay on the straight path, the one prepared by God for God's people, and to allow ourselves to be led by Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

God's offer, through the birth of Jesus, is this. Give up the management of our lives to the One who created us and knows us; to the One who knows where the greenest pastures are and will lead us to them so that we can grow to our fullest potential. Give up the management of our lives to the One who offers us true rest from fear and danger; to the One who loves us, longs for us, and gathers us. John's cry in the wilderness is an invitation to give up the belief that we are self-sufficient, to return to the fold, and to meet our Savior who is our life's shepherd.

We're in the midst of so much turmoil in the world – a war in Ukraine with Russia; another war in the Middle East between Israel and Hamas – both wars showing how cruel people can be to one another; deep division in our country leading up to another messy presidential election cycle; just to name a few of the ways in which we might find ourselves despairing. There's always darkness and turmoil in the world – it's part of the human condition. The way out is not by hoping everything gets fixed or goes back to normal. The way out is through trust in God to guide our lives so that we might be light in the darkness. The way out is to listen for invitations to be transformed into that light that overcomes the darkness.

I said earlier that the Gospel of Mark opens with a quote from Isaiah. But just before Mark quotes Isaiah, there are a few very important words: “The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Not the Good News announced as a one-time event, but the *beginning* of the Good News. The good news began with Jesus and continues to unfold. We have a role in it. We are invited to be part of something big, God's good news to the world.

So let us experience Advent with hope. In the darkness around us, may we see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, and with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

You have an invitation before you today, this second Sunday of Advent. With the prophet Isaiah, announce comfort to God's people. With the prophet John, announce the coming of Christ. With the savior Jesus, be the light that the world cannot overcome. O come, o come Emanuel. Amen.