

-Shepherd of the Mountains

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The Second Sunday of Advent
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“His Road *In* Is Your Way *Out*”
(or, “A Good Announcer”)

Text: Isaiah 40:3-5

3 A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 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. 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

Turn off the television.

Okay, what I *mean* to say is turn off the *sound*, turn down the *volume*.

Turn down the volume of the “*game*,” that is - the “*game*” that is on every “*channel*,” if you will, this time of year. Ever since *Thanksgiving*! Ever since *Halloween*, truth be told.

You know the “*game*” I mean. So, yes, my plea to you this *Advent* season is “turn down the volume on the “*Christmas*” “*game*” that’s blaring on the “TV.” My plea is

to tune in instead to the “radio,” as it were, to - in our theme this Advent morning - “a good announcer,” to a good “play-by-play”/“color” man. Somebody like, say, John the Baptist.

Now in the John the Baptist tradition, of course - “Holy cow!” - Harry Caray of the Cardinals, and the White Sox, and then finally the Cubs.

Or, the only broadcaster ever to be traded for a Major League ball player, for 42 years “the voice of the Detroit Tigers,” Ernie Harwell.

Or if “lighter” is more your taste in announcers, Mr. Funny Man, later [of] “Mr. Belvedere,” Bob Uecker of the Milwaukee Brewers.

Or perhaps *everybody’s* favorite, “Mr. Smooth,” Vin Scully of the Dodgers.

Or if you’re like Jeff Oschwald of our St. Louis Seminary, maybe less well-known Mike Shannon of the St. Louis Cardinals. For Dr. Oschwald remembers how - even after Cards’ games began to be broadcast on *television* - his father would often watch the games on TV, but turn off the television - turn down the volume, that is - and listen to his favorite radio announcer describe what he was seeing with his own eyes.

The point is, any of those announcers was so good that people would rather *hear* one of them broadcast a game than *see a hundred others*!

I know what they mean. Back a few years ago, back in the “glory days” of Blue Ridge High School football, back when those undersized but over-achieving kids seemed to be playing for a state championship nearly every year, we used to drive to Phoenix for as many games as we could. There’s nothing like “being there” in person, after all. But sometimes - like after the AIA moved the final from Friday night to Saturday - “work got in the way,” and we forced to catch the game from home.

Now, one of the Phoenix cable stations would always

pick up the championship contest. But while we loved them being our “eyes,” they “fumbled” so much with the kids’ names, and “dropped the ball” so often when they tried to talk about either school or its town that we couldn’t stand them as our “ears,” and would just turn off the television - turn off the sound, that is; turn down the volume - and tune in instead to “a good announcer” on KRFM or Z92 or White Mountain Radio.

A good announcer was just that important.

And that goes *double* for *Advent!*

And *double* is all the rage this Advent morning.

You heard it from God’s “announcer” - more often called His *prophet - Isaiah*. You’ve heard it before. You heard it every Advent of your *life*.

Hear it once again - *double*:

“*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God*” (v. 1)

Like I say, *double*.

“*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins*” (v. 2).

Again, like I say, *double*.

Now that *first* one’s probably the *easier*. Double *comfort*. In a case where double *comfort* is commanded to be offered, we can be sure of *one* thing, *right*? There must have *some* grief, *some* hurt, *some* pain!

And there *was*. For God’s *Israel*, I mean. For His *Judah*. They were about at their wit’s end. They had had about all they could take. They were filled with a thousand doubts. Their questions were consuming them:

“Is Yahweh for real?”

“If so, does he really care about us?”

“How can we believe in a God who lost a war against heathens and their deities?”

“Why not worship Babylonian gods since their armies prevailed against Yahweh’s?”

“Yahweh, will you be angry with us forever?”

(Lessing, *Isaiah 40-56*, Concordia Commentary, CPH, St. Louis, 2012, p. 33).

And no wonder. They were a long way from home. *Had* been, for a long *time*. So long that some of them simply had begun to adapt - by conforming - you know, go along to get along - to what clearly seemed to be the new reality. They were a small minority, after all, living in a land that worshiped a pagan god - far away from the place where they worshiped *their* God. They were in exile. They were in captivity. They were in Babylon.

Why *wouldn’t* resignation be the order of the day? Why *wouldn’t* they constantly have to fight not to succumb to defeatism?

So, in that case, hear the word of the Lord! Hear the word of Isaiah - writing - amazingly - from a time nearly two hundred years *before* - way back in the eight and early seventh centuries BC! Writing directly into *their* situation! Speaking directly into *their* despair. Calling out with a message to, well, “Turn off the television. Turn off the sound - turn down the volume - on the “*captivity*” “*game*” that was blaring on the “TV.”

“There’s good news! Relief is in sight! ‘Somebody - *please!* - *anybody* - get this message through to my people, *please,*’ says your God”:

“*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*”

“Somebody - *please!* - *anybody* - get this message through to my people, *please,*’ says your God”:

“*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*”

Before we get to that *second* double, let’s stick with the first - the whole “*comfort, comfort*” part.

To be *human* is to need to be *comforted*, isn’t it? Ask the baby in the bassinet, the newborn in its crib. Ask the poor old soul barely still clinging to life. From beginning to

end, they testify, the need for comfort is simply part of being human (so, Rudolf Bohren).

Oh, but in this barren desert that is the world we live in, where so much that we weary travelers see is nothing more than a cruel *mirage*, comfort is, well, *suspect*, isn't it? And for good reason, because so much of what passes for comfort is nothing more than just pious palaver. It's no more than a pleasant pat on the head with a meaningless, "There, there, it will all be all right in the end." It's hollow. It's empty.

"I'll have a *double*!"

Oh, not of *that*, of course - of *this*! Of what God *Himself* is dispensing. Of what *He* here in Isaiah is ordering be poured out. And while the prophet seems to be the first to respond, to shout it out, it would certainly seem that the LORD's intention is that every one of us should do the same, that we should *all* be involved in dispensing comfort to a comfortless world. *Real* comfort. *True* comfort. *This* comfort.

"Make it a double." The God of Israel's order is repeated. Surely that's to underscore the sense of *urgency*, right? A *double* sense of urgency! On the one hand, the people's urgent need of comfort. And on the *other*, the Lord's urgent desire to provide the comfort His people need!

Which is exactly what *true* comfort, *real* comfort, *this* comfort really *is*!

1 *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

2 *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

In *context*, Judah's captives in Babylon are the ones to be comforted. They are being given exactly what they need. They are hearing the reassuring word of their God and LORD.

How do we know? Just read on beyond our few verses this morning. Isaiah lays it all out. He writes of their deli-

verance. He "names names." He calls out a king who hasn't even been born yet, of a people who haven't even risen to power yet. He says, "*Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: 'I am the Lord, . . . who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose''*" (44:24, 28).

And that godly "purpose" is no more and no less than to bring YHWH's people *comfort*! *Help* and comfort. For, where the LORD is concerned, help and comfort go together. There can be no comfort without real help. That's why, with the LORD, there is both.

For that reason, the "*comfort*" that "*God*" orders be given to His captive people is the promise of *help*. Just the help they need. Just the help they were doubted they would ever get. The end of all her "*warfare*" - her captivity, her bondage, her servitude. The "*pardoning*" of her "*iniquity*."

Oh - and now finally to that *second* troubling double! - "*that she had*" - at long last, after decades in captivity - "*received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*"

Actually, it's not as troubling - as baffling, as confusing - as it might seem. The only question is, "Is Isaiah saying - is the LORD saying - that Judah has received double *punishment* or that she is about to receive double *grace*?" And that one seems rather easy to answer.

After all, He has just said that part of the message that is to be proclaimed to His rebellious people is that "*her iniquity is pardoned*." That's what happens to iniquity! That's the only thing that can happen to iniquity. It can't be *atoned* for - not by mere mortals, at least. No amount of punishment will make it right - not double or triple or quadruple!

No, in the kingdom of God's grace, pardon only comes at a great cost, a cost we sinners can't afford, the cost of a very life. Our life.

But on Good Friday, *another* paid that cost. Jesus offered up His life. He exchanged it for *ours*. He used it to

purchase the forgiveness of *our* sin. And therefore, for everyone who believes in God's one-and-only Son as Savior and Lord, our captivity to sin, death and the devil - and our own long exile from our holy God - is ended. *Isaiah's* comfort is *our* comfort. Our warfare - our fight to try to justify ourselves - is ended. Our iniquity is pardoned. We have received from the LORD's hand double for all our sins; He has taken those sins away, and has dressed us instead in the perfect righteousness of Christ Jesus, His Son.

No wonder then, captives, exiles, that "3 *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 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."* Jesus has indeed offered up His life. Jesus has indeed offered up His death. He who is the eternal Son of the ever-loving God has made his way down from his throne in heaven, down through the wilderness of this world, down to Bethlehem's manger, down to Calvary's cross.

He didn't wait until *we* could figure a way *out*. He went ahead and made His way *in*. And His road *in* is *our* way *out*!

The problem is, that while He has made His way *in*, we have blocked His way. We have put up barriers to His coming [to us]. *Spiritual* barriers. "*Valleys*: like "We're so far gone even God Himself couldn't care about *us*." "*Hills*" like "We're doing okay - we're getting by - on our own. We don't need him" But most of all, the "*mountain*" of our own unwillingness to repent.

However, *Isaiah's* message - and *John the Baptist's*, *too* - is that repentance is the only way all those obstacles can be cleared away. It's the same needed road-building that *Dr. Oswald* describes: "Repentance and the confession of sins are the bulldozers and road graders of this Advent highway project."

So, hear the call of *Isaiah*: "*In the wilderness*" - the wilderness of this life, the place of danger, the place of tempting and temptation, the place where it's easy to lose your way, the place you spend your life wandering - "*prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert*" - the place where you could easily die, the place where your hopes and dreams can die with you - "*a highway for our God*."

Hear the call of *John*: "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*."

Oh, not that *He* needs it, of course, for He's already made *His* way *in* - without your help - in Christ Jesus, "*the Way, the Truth, and the Life*" (Jn. 14:6). Yes, the highway that was still in the *planning stages* in *Isaiah's* time, the road that was still being *built* in *John's* time, now stands completely paved.

No, "*prepare the way of the Lord*" because *you* need it. For - as *Dr. Oswald* also writes, "the way that God's own Son cleared still stands as the Way between us and God."

And, as if that weren't enough, it's not just because *you* need it. It's because *others* need it, *too*. And they need *you* - you who have been made ready, who have been led by His Spirit to answer that call from His Word to repent, and have received His grace in His Sacraments. They need *you* - for they need to turn down the volume of the Christmas "*game*" that they hear blaring on every "*channel*" of the "TV" this time of year. They need you to "*speak tenderly*" to them. They need you to "*cry*" to them that "*their warfare is ended, that their iniquity is pardoned, that they have received from the LORD's hand double for all their sins*."

Why *you*? Do you remember a few weeks back? You're the one whom "the Master" left with all those "*talents*" - was it ten, or five, or just the one - while He's "*away*" on that "*long*" "*journey*" of His (Mt. 25:15)? You're the one whom, on His long-delayed but coming-soon return, he'll be asking, "What have you done? What have you done

with what you've been given?" What have you done with all
With all those times, those circumstances, those opportuni-
ties, those situations, those virtues, those abilities, those rela-
tionships, that personality of yours? What have you do to
answer the call: "*Comfort, comfort, my people*"? What have
you done to be the "voice of one crying, "*In the wilderness
prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a
highway for our God*"?

For, on that last day, on the coming day of Jesus' com-
ing again, "*the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all
flesh shall see it together.*"

"A voice says, 'Cry!'" (Is 40:6a).

"And I said, . . . "Here am I. Send me. Send me." (Is.
40:6b, 6:8).

May God grant it for Jesus' sake - and for the sake of a
comfortless world that desperately needs to hear.

Amen.