

“To Be God’s Kingdom, We Must Confess” based Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8  
Delivered on December 6, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

I love these passages because of the way they connect to each other, so I’m going to walk us through them and then explain how they apply to our life.

“Comfort, Comfort my people.” This is what the Lord tells the Jewish nation in exile. Speak tenderly, or kindly, or to the heart of Jerusalem, a city in exile, for her warfare, or her hard service, has ended, that her guilt has been removed, or literally, her penalty of guilt has been accepted as paid off. God is coming to save the people who are in exile.

Make a path for the Lord in the wilderness, the margins, away from the city of Babylon, and lift up the low valleys, tear down what is high by making the mountains flat. And let the uneven terrain, become like a plain, rugged terrain like broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, all humanity will see it.

These are words of hope for a people who are suffering, who have been prisoners. They are a promise of justice and peace, but a reminder of theirs and our humble creation. All flesh, or humanity, is like grass that withers, like flowers that fade. When the breath of the Lord, or the Spirit of the Lord blows upon them, is when they exist and when they don’t. Ultimately, God is in control of the earth and all that is in it, and it is the Word of God that spoke creation into being, not the creation itself, that will last forever.

This is Good News and should be proclaimed by the city of Jerusalem in captivity, proclaimed from the highest places, without fear to all who believe in the God of Israel. The good news is that God is with us, indeed. Here is your God. Behold the Lord comes with might, with his arm – a metaphor for his power – ruling for Him, God who pays our debts, who is our reward and is himself the reward that God demands of us. God is a shepherd, who tends to the flock of the faithful, using that power, that arm, to gather the lambs and carry them in God’s robes, which Isaiah earlier said in Chapter 6 fill all of creation. That shepherd will gently lead the mother sheep, a metaphor for these cities of Judah, home.

I love this text because of the depth of its imagery in describing God’s presence with us. The people of Judah were taken into captivity because they failed to keep the covenant. They sinned by worshipping false gods, and turned their back on God, trusting in earthly comforts, earthly rulers, and earthly promises. But God did not abandon them, bringing God’s comfort, God’s rule, restoring them, giving peace, in God’s promises of covenant.

Friends, we are now in the second week of Advent, during which we focus on peace. The Hebrew word for Peace is ‘shalom,’ which is not simply an absence of conflict, but offers a sense wholeness, of being made right, of prosperity or abundance. This is not in the sense of riches, but in having all that we need, from God.

The people of Judah were taken to Babylon about 70 years earlier, after they thought they had just struck an earthly 'peace,' when Babylon's ruler flattered Judah's king, Hezekiah, sending him best wishes for getting well. How does Hezekiah respond? He starts boasting of all that Judah had, and thus gives a preview what Babylon would acquire, if the empire conquered Judah, which, of course, they then did.

But the message in this passage today is that this time of exile is now over. The people will be returning to their homeland, back to Jerusalem and Judea. God was empowering another empire, Persia, to conquer the Babylonians, and the new King would issue an edict allowing the Jews to return home. But the promise is bigger than just a return to the homeland, because the promise as we saw in the last few verses, talked of God's arm coming down to the people. Later in Isaiah, this arm is the suffering servant, the people's representative, Israel, who bears the brunt of sins power, who suffers and dies on behalf of the people.

This is where Mark picks up this passage from Isaiah, to show its final fulfillment. The Jewish people, while now in their homeland, still felt like they were in exile. Whether under the Persians, the Greeks, the Assyrians, or the Romans, even being home, the Jewish people felt as if they were still not home because they were occupied by former empires.

So, the prophet Daniel said the exile of 70 years predicted by Jeremiah and ended with the return, was not really the end of exile, but that it would last 70 weeks of years, or approximately 490 years, pointing to the first century. So, at the time of Jesus, Messianic hopes were really, really high. So, Mark's gospel starts out strong on this point, by pointing to this passage in Isaiah.

For Mark, the reference to John the Baptist as the voice crying out in the wilderness, seems to be only a part of what he is matching up to the story of Jesus he tells. In that first sentence, he says that this is the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, just as it is written in Isaiah. He then only quotes the beginning of this passage in Isaiah, even though the good news comes toward the end of it.

I think Mark intends for the whole reading or even his whole gospel, to be understood through Isaiah 40, or maybe even through all of the second section of Isaiah, Chapters 40-55. In light of this, I believe this passage from Mark centers on the idea of confession. The word for confession in Greek means to speak the truth, or literally, the word *homologos* means to speak "the same word," or even the same reason, or rationale. To lie, of course, is to have two words for one event, the truth and the lie. This is the same word Paul uses in Romans 10:9, when he says that 'if you confess Jesus is Lord' ...'then you will be saved.'

There are two confessions at play in today's gospel reading and both are essential to our faith. Both are essential to what it means to be a citizen in the Kingdom of God, a Christian, namely

that we must tell the truth of our sins as the people did with John the baptizer, and the second truth is that Jesus is the arm or power of God, who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit.

Friends, I think that we can relate to what it feels like to be in Exile. I've talked about this before, as we live in a post-Christian world, increasingly digital, and often hostile, especially in our Western Culture, to the idea of God. It is hostile even more so to the idea that God asks us to humble ourselves in repentance, even segments of the church struggle with that. And hostile still more to the idea that God desires us to live empowered by a Holy Spirit inside of us, which frightens some churches too. The world rejects the idea that God became a human like us, to live, die and rise again for us to live as God lives, abundantly in peace now, and eternally in the new creation.

The world we live in values public relations and spin, it values being a showman, it values dividing the truth. It values the quest for power, not humility, and it values our individual exceptionalism. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of God desires *homologos*, or one Word from us. The Kingdom asks us to confess our sins in humility, not the sins of others, our sins. The Kingdom of God says we must also confess one word, one truth of the Word made flesh, in Jesus Christ, who is the Lord, the One God of Israel, who came down to do what no human could do for us, and conquered sin and death, by paying its price, sharing in our humanity, but without sin, and being lifted high on that cross, to die a sinner's death, and then rise again, to give us God's life.

Friends, the truth is that we are not in exile, but we are called to rebuild creation with God. We are called to bring heaven and earth together in the promise of God found in Jesus's death and resurrection. A new creation has begun, and in every believer, with the Holy Spirit inside of us. We are temples of God's Holy Spirit and our lives must reflect that. Like people in exile, the burdens of sin and death still haunt us, but we do not have to be slaves to them anymore.

The arm of God has come down and holds us. Yes, Jesus is that arm, he is the Good Shepherd who has pulled us into the fold. The wolves of this world still threaten the flock with sin and death, but their power is not real, as the shepherd laid down his life for us. When we are baptized in Christ, we are baptized into his death, and so, we are also baptized into his life, by the Holy Spirit. To be the church is to confess the truth that is held so succinctly in these eight verses in Mark.

The Good News is that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed King, and that Jesus is the Son of God, One with God, the arm of God that Isaiah refers to. The voice in the wilderness calls us to make a path for him. That path is made by humbly repenting of our sins, not making excuses for them, but confessing – giving only one word about them – the truth. We can't justify ourselves, but we can confess our sin.

But that is not the end of our story, in Jesus, our baptism brings with it the Holy Spirit, for by Christ's death and resurrection we are made clean to house the Spirit of God, which we must

allow to transform our minds. Don't try to fight that Spirit, but live empowered by it, to love God with all your heart, soul and strength, and love your neighbors as you love yourself and as you would love even your own family. The Spirit is God with us, in us and among us, and the Spirit pours the love of God out in our hearts.

So, in this Advent season, humbly make your confession and do so with confidence. Confess your sins to God and one another, turning your heart to Jesus as your Lord. Prepare for his coming, so that you can live empowered by the Spirit to confess the truth about Jesus, that you are loved by him, the One who though being one with the Father, humbled himself to share in your humanity, obedient to your limits, and obedient to the covenant God made with Abraham, for his descendants to bring light to all nations. Let us be children of Abraham and children of God, and be God's Kingdom and bear Christ's light, by telling the truth in our confessions of both our sin and our faith. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

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words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

B O S O M T H E I R R S U R E L Y R D V M L R  
L H H G R A S S T E N D E R L Y F E O O I E O  
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C I T I E S S H A L L H R E W A R D F I E L D  
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Words in the puzzle are printed in **bold italic**.

(Isaiah 40:1-11 NRSV) **Comfort**, O comfort my **people**, says your God. **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**. A **voice cries** out: "In the **wilderness prepare** the way of the LORD, **make straight** in the **desert** a **highway** for our God. **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**. **Then** the **glory** of the LORD shall be **revealed**, and all people shall see it **together**, for the **mouth** of the LORD has **spoken**." A voice **says**, "Cry out!" And I **said**, "**What shall** I cry?" All people are grass, **their constancy** is **like** the **flower** of the **field**. The grass **withers**, the flower **fades**, **when** the **breath** of the LORD **blows upon** it; **surely** the people are **grass**. The grass withers, the flower **fades**; but the **word** of our **God** will **stand forever**. Get 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!" **See**, the Lord GOD **comes** with **might**, and his arm **rules** for **him**; his **reward** is with him, and his **recompense before** him. He **will feed** his **flock** like a **shepherd**; he will **gather** the **lambs** in his **arms**, and **carry them** in his **bosom**, and **gently lead** the **mother sheep**.