

**And Heaven and Nature Sing:
Preparation**

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

December 6, 2020

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Biblical scholars are generally agreed that Mark was the first gospel written. Before there was a Gospel of Matthew, Luke, or John, the earliest Christians read Mark's account of the life of Jesus. So please notice where Mark says that the story of Jesus begins: in the wilderness, with the voice of one crying in the wilderness. According to Mark, the story does not begin with the cry of a baby in a manger. It begins with the cry of John the Baptist in the wilderness:

*Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

We could argue that one of the first recorded words about the life and ministry of Jesus is this: prepare. Mark knew that before heaven and nature sing the glorious news of Christmas, we must prepare. Out of our threatening wildernesses, we must prepare the way of the Lord.

But that's not the full picture. To get the full picture, we must include that passage from Isaiah. Let me set the stage. Scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three parts. In chapters 1-39, the prophet Isaiah warned the people of impending disaster. Isaiah saw great wickedness in the land. He warned the people that judgment would come, that a national tragedy loomed on the horizon. A foreign army would invade their land, he warned, and take them into exile in another land. Near the end of chapter 39 Isaiah prophesied, "Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left," says the Lord."

The second part of Isaiah begins with chapter forty, our text for today. Scholars believe that many years elapsed between the end of chapter thirty-nine and the beginning of chapter forty. The tragedy Isaiah predicted in chapter thirty-nine had come to pass. It was a national catastrophe. A foreign army did invade and take them to another land, as he warned. When chapter

forty opens, they are prisoners in Babylon. Listen to these tender words from the prophet Isaiah:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that she has received from the
Lord's hand
double for her sins.*

It was a terrible time, a time of spiritual wilderness. The people felt abandoned. They languished in Babylon. And this was the word of the Lord to them. Mark remembered it:

*A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the
way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.'*

I'm convinced that Mark, the first gospel written, was trying to remind his readers of what *had* happened. God *had been* their deliverer. When they were in the wilderness of exile, God *had been* their hope. That was their shared history. But that's not all Mark was doing. He was also telling them to prepare for a new Deliverer, One who would enter their new wilderness and baptize them with the Holy Spirit, One who would feel their pain, One who would hear their deepest longings, One who would fill the people with hope. So, prepare the way, John the Baptist cried in the wilderness. Get ready. Build a highway in the desert, for God's Deliverer is coming.

Advent 2020 finds us again in a wilderness, doesn't it? The wilderness of a cruel, unrelenting pandemic, something most of us never dreamed possible. Dr. Robert Redfield, head of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, gave a shocking and sobering assessment this past week. The next few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, he said on Wednesday, will be among "the most difficult in the public health history of the nation." By February, he fears we will have 450,000 deaths attributed to the virus. Yes, we are in a wilderness this year, unlike anything we have ever seen, and we

need this word from Mark: prepare. For One who feels our pain. For One who hears our deepest longings. One who fills us with hope.

We need more than chestnuts roasting on an open fire this year. We need the depth and strength of faith. Faith that has stood the test of time. Faith that has seen many pandemics, countless wildernesses. We need towering, inspiring, and hopeful faith. So, today let us prepare. Before heaven and nature sing the glorious news of Christmas, let us prepare the way of the Lord. And let us begin right here at this table, before this cross.

Prayer of Confession

Most Merciful God, as we enter into a new year, we humbly confess the ways in which we have failed to love You and love our neighbors, the things which we have said to cause hurt or malice, and the ways our actions did not reflect the peacemakers You call us to be. We confess that there have been times we have wandered from Your righteousness. Have mercy on us for You are merciful, and forgive us our sins that we might grow more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

Assurance of Pardon

Beloveds, God is slow to anger and full of compassion. Surely as the sun will rise and just as you have confessed before God, you are forgiven through Christ. May you walk in the freedom of God's unending grace.

Invitation to the Table of the Lord

I invite you now to the table of the Lord. Hear his story.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."