

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
December 2 & 3, 2017  
Debbie Manning  
The Promise to Comfort | Isaiah 40**

Good Morning everyone! I am Debbie Manning. I'm part of the Congregational Care team, along with Jody Phenow and Melissa Schaser, and as I think about it, add in Sarah Lightbody leading the worship today and I have two words for you: Girl power! It's so good to be with you guys today. We are starting Advent; It's our first week of Advent and we are preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus—God with us. And I love this time of the year because there is a lot of expectation and anticipation. You know, when we prepare for a worship series, we have a meeting at the beginning of it and anyone who will be involved in it, anyone who is going to be preaching, is invited to it. We talk about the vision and the direction of where we are going. Well, when we were doing the Advent meeting, I missed it. I was on vacation. So a few weeks back, I emailed David Hammond, the Director of Worship and Communications, and I asked him to give me some direction—where are we going with this? And true to how David is, he sent back a detailed email that was really helpful, but he ended it with a sentence that made me laugh. And the sentence was, “Ask Hoodie, she’s brilliant.” Well, Hoodie is Heather Hood, and many of you know her. She is our Minister of Music and Worship. And that had me laughing. So then of course I called Heather Hood, who is of course brilliant, and she gave me some great wisdom and direction for this sermon. I wanted to bring that up because I'm a big believer in giving credit where credit is due, and if you guys walk out of here today and you're thinking *Oh my gosh, that message!* I hope you're thinking *boy, that Debbie Manning, she sure knows how to use her resources.* On the other hand, if you walk out today and you are like *nah, not so much with the message...* Heather Hood. Anyway, it is awesome to be part of a team that can collaborate and work together. It takes a village to make this happen; that's how we work here, and I love being a part of it.

Well, we just finished a series on Moses and we can picture Moses on the mountaintop overlooking the Promised Land. Looking for the fulfillment of the long awaited promise that God's people would have a home, and that they could be with God, and God would provide for them and protect them. Flash forward a few hundred years and we are with the prophet Isaiah who has a vision of a future where God would be with us, and that He would provide hope and healing for His people. And that's were we will be throughout Advent—in the book of Isaiah. And with all that is going on in our world right now, and in our country—it feels so divisive—and in our communities, and in our own lives, I think this is a great place to land. In Isaiah we hear these words of comfort, and I think for so many of us we have a yearning for just that—some hope and some comfort. Our text today speaks to the promise of comfort.

We are in the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet, a visionary, someone who revealed a life lived for God—a God-centered way of seeing and living. And we can look at the book of Isaiah in two parts. First Isaiah is chapters 1-39. It deals with Judah, and God—over and over again—warning His people *Repent! Repent from your unfaithful ways*. But they don't respond and then God sends them into exile. Now the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is not described, but in chapter 39 it's anticipated, and in chapter 40 it's assumed. And this is where everything turns in this book, where the tone changes from one of confrontation to one of assurance. The second half of the book, sometimes referred to as Isaiah of Exile, chapters 40-66, is where our text comes from today. It speaks directly to the needs and the despair of the people of Judah who now live in Babylonia in exile. This text is often used in Advent, in part because the gospel writers used it to communicate what was, in their time, a very similar instance of unprecedented, unexpected, unearned, divine compassion in the entrance of Jesus into the world. In the gospels, John the Baptist is the messenger and Jesus is the one who comes with power and tenderness. In trying to describe the indescribable, they turn to this passage in Isaiah as a way to illustrate their experience.

<sup>1</sup> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." [Isaiah 40:1-5]

I think comfort is a powerful thing, especially when people's situations are dire. We see a shift in the second half of Isaiah. God is no longer coming to His people in warning and judgment, He is now coming to a people who have been in exile for over 100 years, a people living in misery and despair, people traumatized by war and loss. Because of their unfaithfulness to God, they have been stripped of their land, their temple, and their very identity while in exile. This is the context. What Isaiah tells them is that God has not forgotten them. God knew exactly what His people needed right then, and after a long period of silence, his first words were those of comfort—tender words, spoken to their heart. God knew of their pain and He responded, "Comfort, comfort My people."

Now, I love this. I think it is beautiful. But for me when I look at this text, it's not so much the promise of comfort. I think Isaiah is saying, "Take comfort" because the promise is that the Comforter is coming, and in that there is a charge for us. Verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Now this is familiar to us because all four gospels repeat this. John the Baptist points back to Isaiah's words when they are getting ready for the Messiah, but I think in this

text there is also a call for us to prepare the way. Isaiah uses a road metaphor to say *God is coming to get you and bring you out of exile. Prepare the way. The road must be fixed. Every valley should be raised up, every mountain will be made low, the rough ground should be made level, the rugged places a plain.* This is a metaphor. It is based on the rough terrain as one approaches Jerusalem from the east, but it's a metaphor for personal repentance and social change. Isaiah is saying *make the world ready because the Messiah is coming.* I love this imagery of radical transformation of earthly topography, and it is all a prelude to the mind-blowing revelation of the glory of the Lord.

Well, preparing the way should be a little easier for us than the ancient Israelites, right? I mean, this is a people that were living in exile. The Messiah hadn't come yet. They didn't even really know what they were looking for. They were thinking that a king would come riding in on a horse, and that he would be a conquering ruler of the kingdom. That's not what Jesus looked like when He came, and when He did come hundreds of years later, there were many Jews that missed Him because He wasn't what they expected; they didn't recognize Him. They didn't know who was coming and they hadn't prepared.

But not us, right? Over two thousand years ago, God came to earth. Gosh, we have the benefit of eyewitness accounts. We know the stories. Jesus told us and showed us what it meant to be kingdom people, and on top of all that, He left His Holy Spirit to help guide us and nudge us. So, we are people who know how to prepare. And if the way that we prepare for the coming of the Lord in the Advent season is any kind of evidence for how we prepare for God in our day-to-day life all year round, we've got this, don't we? Or do we? Because I am going to confess that I can barely remember a Christmas that I haven't been exhausted. I run all Advent season...gosh, I work at a church...and I run and I buy gifts and I buy food and we put our tree up and we decorate our house and we have company and we are busy, busy, busy...and to be very honest with you, Jesus isn't at the top of my list at Advent—He ends up at the bottom. And I'm going to guess that I'm not the only one. And those traditions—some of them are wonderful, and they are part of our stories and they are part of who we are, but they cannot be our priority. We have to prioritize, ready in our hearts, that it is not the leftover time that we give to Jesus. It's got to be front and center. But here's the good news, lest you get depressed by my message. The good news is it's the first week in Advent! We have time; we can change things up. And we are going to do that, that's for sure. And I think the real truth is that we have far more similarities with those ancient Israelites than we would like to think. And we might not be in the same physical exile, but we certainly share the same spiritual exile, because we are people who continue to forget our first love, and we walk away over and over again from a God who loves us and continues to pursue us. We are people who wander; we are prone to wander. And if you ask me, that sounds an awful lot like the story of the Israelites in the Old Testament. We are people in need of Jesus, and I think in spite of the fact that we know who we are looking for, it's still hard, because these encounters with God come in ways that sometimes we least expect, and if we aren't continually preparing our heart and soul, we will miss Him. We might not even recognize Him.

What a year it has been. Many of you know that this past summer my husband Steve and I became grandparents for the very first time, and my sister passed away after an eleven-year battle with cancer. And as I was preparing for this message, it struck me how my son Sam and his wife Jenny—there she is with my sister Leslie just a month before Leslie died [picture shown]—it struck me how their preparation for life and death was so similar, and that the end result for both was the glory of God revealed. Now my sister certainly had her to-do list—you know, health directives and her will and getting things in order—as did Jenny and Sam...painting the baby's room, gathering all that cool gear you get these days for babies, reading books, and going to classes. And they did all those things and those are great things, but what was really important, what the real preparation for this baby and for my sister stepping into heaven, was the spiritual preparation of the heart. Because here's the deal: the truth was that nothing happened as expected. My sister died months earlier than we thought. She was on a trip visiting us in our home and she died there, and that little baby that they prepared so long for came five days late, after fifty hours of labor. But what helped both of those, and everyone that got to be part of the story, was the preparation of the heart. And it was moments like this where we gathered around and we prayed for one another. It was moments where we celebrated life, whether it was through baby showers or through last gatherings of family events at the end of my sister's life...but it was about the connection to God and one another that was the preparation of the heart. Because the only preparation that mattered was that of the heart and soul—the spiritual preparation—and the regular and intentional connection to God and one another. It's the prep that matters, because in life and death and the day-to-day, that's when we get to see God. That's when we encounter the Lord.

Now, when my sister died and I sat at her bedside, there was this incredible moment that was beyond anything any of us could have hoped or imagined, but we got to see God and His glory revealed, and it was beautiful. It had nothing to do with getting everything done. It had everything to do with the heart.

And likewise, when our little Soren was born and I looked into that little baby's eyes, the glory of God was revealed in this new life. And it blew us all away, and we could have never been fully prepared for that. God always shows up in ways beyond us. And in the day-to-day, this same God shows Himself to us. And if we don't pause along the way, if we don't clear our minds, if we don't have regular practices where we are connecting to the Creator, we will miss Him.

So I kind of gave you the “why”...why it's important to prepare the way. But what about the “how”? How do we make room for God in our life? How do we prepare for the presence of God, for that encounter with God? Revelation chapter 2, verse 5 says this:

Remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. [Revelation 2:5 ESV]

You know, in the scripture, Jesus is talking to the church at Ephesus who once was intense and so in love with Jesus, but they had forgotten their first love. They wandered

away from that first love. But in Revelation, we are provided with three practices that we can use to prepare for God's presence. The first one is to remember. The practice of remembering...we have to pause, we have to stop, we have to set aside time—not at the end of the day when we don't have anything leftover, but at the beginning. And then we do it throughout the day, and we remember and we connect to God, and we are filled with gratitude to our Creator for all His gifts. And then we have to repent, and repenting involves sort of a hard look at ourselves, and an honest look. What are the things that are keeping us separate from God and one another? And then we confess that. And when we do those things, we turn ourselves back to the one who loves us, and that's when the radical transformation happens. And it is a beautiful thing.

So as we leave today, maybe we ask ourselves what's blocking the path? What's the distraction? What is stopping us from keeping Jesus front and center? And here's what I love...it kind of sounds big, right? But we could commit to one practice – that sounds doable. We could commit to one practice, one practice of pausing, of stopping, of staying centered with our God, and we can reset the whole tone of Advent. And our hope and prayer would be that it would reset our life and then reset our year. And when we reset who we are, this is what happens:

“...And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” [Isaiah 40:5]

This text is often described as a word of comfort, a word of tenderness after a very long, dark night of exile. And while that is true, I don't think the real promise is a promise of comfort, or comfort to come. I think the real promise is in the Comforter who already came. And we have a role to play. We have a charge, and that charge is to prepare. To prepare ourselves for those encounters with God—it's not for our sake, but it's for the world's sake and it's for His sake. The gospel is the good news that Isaiah talks about. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to His people. And either we prepare and expect to experience the comfort and hope of the God who revealed Himself in the Bible, and in the person of Jesus Christ, or we will miss it.

Pray with me:

Holy and gracious God, we come before You Lord. Humbly. Convicted. And we need You. We need You to help us to remember, and to repent, and to return. God we pray that maybe we might have a fresh start this Advent. That with Your help we could keep Jesus front and center, and that as Your glory is revealed, it's not just to us, it is to a world that needs it. We pray all this in Your holy name. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*