

“PREPARE THE WAY TO COMFORT”

Dec. 10, 2017 – 2nd of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 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.

3 A voice cries out: "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 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 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. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 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!" 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 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.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,"'

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

When you are seven things in your life seem to be experienced on a more grand sense of scale. Life is always bigger. Joys more joyful. Hurts more hurtful. Pain more intense. Molehills become mountains much more easily. Relatively speaking a 7 year olds world, like the real world, is filled with great wonders and great horrors, great triumphs and great tragedies, great opportunities with great consequences.

It's those consequences that get you. It's the what happens when you go ahead and do that which your small mind tells you that you probably shouldn't, -- but you're seven.

There was a seven year old who grew up on an old farm. Along with a tremendous amount of freedom to roam the place, including the forested land that was a part of the property, came the responsibilities assigned to seven year olds. Feed the chickens. Help weed the garden. Make sure the pigs have fresh water. And others as any occasion warranted. Of course these chores could be construed as constraining. They were, most of the time, directly opposite of what 'he wanted to do.' There were far many more other more interesting seven year old things to do.

One Saturday morning with visions of many, many seven year old things to do in his head he was told that before he played, there was a 5 gallon bucket on the back step that was to be filled with the black walnuts which had fallen to the ground from the tree next to the big barn on the property. This was an early

December chore he had done before and as chores went it wasn't too bad. He could even make a game of it placing the bucket below the slope of the barn and throwing the walnuts up that steep slope one at a time, and watching them roll down, trying to catch them in the bucket.

A great game, on any other day that would help him while away an hour or two, but this day he had decided that he was going to go and find this year's Christmas tree in the woods. A chore, heretofore, that was his older brothers, and his older brothers before him. It was simple. Tramp through the woods, find a tree, mark it with a red band of cloth, go and get your Dad, cut the most magnificent tree ever, not those pitiful scrawny one's his brother found, and be the family hero.

But these walnuts would mean his brother who was 12, would, no doubt, finally get out of bed and beat him to a tree. He couldn't let that happen. He wrapped up, complete with gloves and as he was heading out the door his mother reminded him, "get up that bucket of walnuts before you do anything else." "Oh, Mom", he said. "You usually like to pick up walnuts." So true, but he couldn't tell her his plan – one of the cardinal rules of living on the farm, at least for seven year olds, was don't go off into the woods by yourself. What to do? He wasn't usually blatantly disobedient – but a tree for the 'family' was a great excuse, right?

Isn't that the way of the world. We find ourselves standing at the horns of a dilemma, between something we don't want to do and something we do want to do that may have dire consequences. Between obedience and disobedience.

Between following the rules and not. Between sinfulness and righteousness. It's been the human condition since the beginning of time. Take a bite of the apple and be free or perhaps, die.

So. Off he goes. In his mind the quite reasonable conjecture that the praise of finding the perfect tree will overcome any negative fallout caused by his disobedience on the walnut front. Out by the barn he goes, taking and leaving the bucket under the tree. His seven year old reasoning is that they'll see the bucket and believe that he's close by. He even hurriedly picks up a few walnuts and tosses them in the bucket. He is so smart. Outthinking grownups is so easy. He goes by the tool shed and considers taking the small ax with him but somewhere, even in this seven year old brain, a voice says 'don't push your luck.'

It's a grey and cold early December morning. His self appointed task is to go, find the tree, mark it and his trail back to the house, all before lunch time and a big steaming bowl of his mom's chili con carne he saw her preparing in the kitchen. Easy peasy. Off he goes into the woods beyond the barn, beyond the walnuts, beyond any constraints. In twenty minutes or so he's already kind of deep in the woods. He's looked at maybe, in his mind, about a million trees. Not one of them 'the one.' So deeper he goes. He's pretty sure that on the edge of the property there's a fence that belongs to Mr. Swinson, their neighbor, so he's ok to just keep going. In another 30 minutes or so he guesses, because he doesn't yet have the watch he hopes he'll get for Christmas. After another million trees, he

spots it. It is perfect. About twelve feet tall by his estimation, which he guesses is just right for the living room. How's he supposed to know the living room has a with a 9 foot ceiling. (Come on – he's seven.) It's that perfect Christmas tree shape. (hand gesture) Hardly any holes. It will be magnificent.

He ties the red cloth on a branch, easily seen, and turns to head back. Only he's not at all sure which way 'back is.' In only a minute or two this astute seven year old figures out that he's lost. Really lost. All of those fall leaves he's been tramping though didn't leave a trail. He forgot to mark his way. It was cold and cloudy and looked like it was going to – uh, oh, it's raining. So up under a tree he stands. At least he knows how to get out of the rain. He hears a rustling in the leaves nearby. (Pause to listen.) He's pretty sure it's too cold for snakes.

Have you ever been lost? You know really lost? Out of place? Away from all that's familiar and safe. Lost is even worse than being in trouble. And when you are lost and in trouble? Not good.

Now as story teller I would continue for another twenty minutes or so or we can go fast forward a little bit. On his way to the barn to find the Christmas tree stand because he knows that older brother is going to find one today, Dad notices the five gallon bucket sitting by the barn with a few walnuts in the bottom -- but no seven year old. He figures he got cold and went inside to watch cartoons. He kind of smiles to himself because he knows the boys Mom will soon redirect him. He's busy so he doesn't investigate any further. Mom looks out the window and sees

Dad going to the barn and the bucket under the tree and figures the wayward seven year old has been given something more pressing to do by the Dad. "It'll take that boy all day," she thinks. She kind of shivers, she's not sure why – maybe because its cold and cloudy and looks like rain or maybe snow – or maybe it's a mom thing. By noon the chili is ready and she calls the troops in to eat. No seven year old. The older brother, not to long out of bed, is dispatched to go to the barn and get him. No seven year old. Where could he be? His Sister says he asked her for a piece of red cloth. The older says that last night he asked about going for the tree today. The mom, knowing the older brother says, 'what did you tell him?' The older brother says, "I told him to he wasn't going to tag along with me. He'd slow me down." The he said, "he's not stupid enough to go look for a tree on his own?!" Is he? Mother and father gives older brother a glare.

In minutes, chili in bowls cooling on the table, all are bundled up and heading off to look for the seven year old. Mom is anxious. Dad is trying to decide how angry he is. Sister is thinking, "I never get to look for the tree." And older brother is thinking, "Somehow this will all get blamed on me."

Meanwhile the seven year old is cold, still lost, hungry, scared, and definitely worried about being cold, lost, hungry, scared and deep, deep in the woods in deep, deep trouble. He's hungry so he knows it's after lunch. As dark as it's getting it may be supper time. He figures he's in the wilderness. And the wilderness is a scary, scary place to be. It may be where you die. He's too young

to die. He's debating inside of himself now. Partially berating himself for doing something so dumb. Partially trying to decide if it's better to stay where he is or try to get home. Partially wondering if they'll bother to look for him at all. He knows home can't be THAT far. But he doesn't know the way. One of his hands is really cold too. He lost a mitten somewhere.

Dad decides that he and sister will go one way. And older brother and mom another way. He tells older brother to whistle if they find him and he'll do the same. Sister spies the mitten after going a hundred yards or so and Dad whistles bringing the other two.

Deep in the woods the boy here's a whistle. His dad's whistle. In an instant he's flush with this amazing feeling. His cold, shivering little body, is suddenly filled with a rush of what? He's not sure to name it. Later when he tells this story he'll relate that the feeling was hope – and immediately that sense of hope – gave him peace. And he knew, somehow that it would be all right. He wouldn't die. He'd be in trouble. But he wouldn't die.

He didn't die. He didn't know how to whistle yet so he started shouting. "Here I am? I'm lost, I'm lost. Find me." Older brother heard him first and took off in the direction of the little voice. The others were just behind. He was found. He was redeemed. He was saved. His little body was flooded with emotion and he was sobbing and Mom's anxiety was abated, and seeing him safe Dad's anger vanished, and Sister cried too because that was her job, and older brother looked

over and saw a perfect tree with a red cloth tied to it slapped him on the back and said, "Nice tree dufus – was it worth all this."

The seven year old managed to say, "do we know how to get home?" His father, picking him up, said, 'have a little faith, son, here's the way.'" And off they went. Unexpected words of comfort and pardon hanging in the air like some prophetic whisper. Arms around him. His pudgy scratched, tear stained face wiped clean. Somewhere in the mire of the trouble he's gotten into – there is forgiveness, restoration, a welcome return home. Beautiful tree dragging behind. Home to warmth and forgiveness and reheated chili and thanks for Christmas blessings.

"Comfort, comfort my people," sings the old prophet Isaiah as the presence of God fills him. Words longed for and spoken to an ancient people who are quite like all people, people who have found themselves lost in sin and sadness, people divided by doubt, people who have suffered much, people in exile in their own land and heart. People who have been divided. People who need to find a way back to God...

There are moments in our lives, as the people of God, and as children of God when we want to hear, when we need to hear that there is comfort, there is forgiveness, there is hope for peace in our living. Even in the chaos, even in the lostness, that somehow order will be restored, that heaven and all nature will align and sing.

Isaiah speaks with tenderness to a people that has endured too much -- double grief for their sins, known and unknown. He reminds them that God's word and love stand forever and are not transitory, like flesh and grass. He reminds them that, after all that has happened to them, the covenant and bond between God and God's people still stands. The the shepherd God is coming for them.

John the Baptist knows us better, he knows we're way too much like seven year olds, we don't 'notice' things so well. He knows we need a more forceful reminder. He knows another more person 'way' must be prepared in our hearts and minds. He calls his people out, away from home and hearth, into the wilderness, where they will enter the places of confrontation with the brokenness and unfaithfulness of their lives. He calls them not to terrify them, but to bring them to a place of cleansing and renewal, a place to encounter God directly, without illusions. For John the Baptist, the desert, the wilderness, is a place to be stripped of all preoccupations and accumulations of life. When they enter the wilderness, seekers will find the God who is searching for them, ready to bind their wounds. 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.

Why is Advent so important to us? Why do we hear and rehearse the promises once again? Why do we so tenderly and carefully prepare this way to another celebration of the birthing of God in our midst? To remind us in this place that echoes with words of comfort, with tidings of comfort and joy...that our Lord,

Immanuel, comes to us when we cry out in our need....and he shall feed his flock....and the glory of the Lord shall be known in this place and in all the world.

We prepare this way so that the wilderness within us might flourish again.

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