

**12.10.23 – Second Sunday of Advent – PEACE**

**“Christ’s Ambassador”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)**

<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.”

<sup>6</sup> A voice says, “Cry out.”  
And I said, “What shall I cry?”

“All people are like grass,  
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.  
Surely the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
but the word of our God endures forever.”

<sup>9</sup> You who bring good news to Zion,  
go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem,  
lift up your voice with a shout,  
lift it up, do not be afraid;  
say to the towns of Judah,  
“Here is your God!”

<sup>10</sup> See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,  
and he rules with a mighty arm.  
See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him.  
<sup>11</sup> He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
 He gathers the lambs in his arms  
 and carries them close to his heart;  
 he gently leads those that have young.

**Leader: These Prophetic Words of Peace Are of God!**

All: Thanks be to God!

**Mark 1:1-8 (NLT)**

*John the Baptist Prepares the Way*

<sup>1</sup> This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began <sup>2</sup> just as the prophet Isaiah had written:

“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
 and he will prepare your way.

<sup>3</sup> He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
 ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!  
 Clear the road for him!’”

<sup>4</sup> This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. <sup>5</sup> All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.

<sup>7</sup> John announced: “Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!”

**Leader: These Words of Anticipation Are of God.** All: Thanks be to God!

**Please pray with me:**

Oh God, our peacebuilder and promise of hope, we worship you today with Scripture, prayer, song, and decorations to enhance our sanctuary. Help us to continue this Advent season with love in mind for all four weeks. Yes, Lord, we express Peace today, so we especially pray for peace in worldly conflicts. May we surrender our wants and arrogance to you this season and recommit to studying your word. Help us to remember our legacies of faith, Christmas memories of love, and generations of family traditions. Let us share our inner peace with others, especially the PEACE your salvation brings. Speak to us in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

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Merry Christmas! Are you starting to get into the holiday spirit?

Well, thanks to our tree trimming and the Sopranessence concert

yesterday afternoon, I finally am. Thank you to those who attended; it

was a lovely program of classical, carols, and some new Christmas songs I had never heard before. And about a dozen folks had never been here before to our church. That's a good thing!

And please remember that for Christmas Eve, our normal special service will be at 11:00 am this year with a woodwind quintet and a guest or two for our vocal ensemble. Plan not only to attend, but please invite your families, neighbors, and friends to join us.

Today's Advent lesson on Peace is even more challenging this year than it was last year, with the wars in Israel and Ukraine still raging. Nevertheless, we read and will study these familiar passages in Isaiah and Mark. Don't we need a "voice calling out in the wilderness" this year? Both passages use those words to prophecy a messenger. This messenger would prepare the world to receive **God**, yes, God through Jesus. If he came today, either John the Baptist or Jesus, would we listen and be ready to receive the message of repentance, forgiveness, and service to others?

Isaiah 40 begins with comforting words of deliverance from God in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The exiles' time of trial over the last seventy (70) years in Babylon is almost over. Israel was punished for her sins and has doubly paid the price. "When the glory of the Lord is revealed" or in our translation, "the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm (Is 40:10)" for Isaiah would be when the millennial kingdom occurred. In verse 3, some translations prefer the word "desert" to "wilderness"; desert was the wasteland between Babylon and Palestine. Babylon is modern day Iraq and Palestine is Israel, so to travel from Babylon, the wasteland would be the desert areas of Saudi Arabia. And as we know, desert land is treacherous to navigate. So, naturally or figuratively, the

return to their homeland would also be difficult. Words of comfort would be welcome.

According to the commentaries and what I could discern from the maps, there are no mountains between Babylon and Jerusalem, so one interpretation is that the mountains and hills in the poetry are illustrative words of life's obstacles—political, physical, or psychological health issues, or spiritual restlessness. Those dramatic struggles will be leveled out to be more tolerable. Raising the valleys and lowering the mountains actually refer to workmen removing rocks and building up pathways to prepare the roads for dignitaries or royalty, in this case in anticipation of the Lord's coming, a Royal Ambassador of sorts. Remember, we are reading prophetic poetry in Isaiah that was later used by John the Baptist in the Gospel accounts. We, however, may interpret verse 4b “the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain” to be words of comfort and reassurance that bring inner peace, a vision of good things, easy pathways, and no struggle. *Eirene* is the Greek word, and *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for wholeness and peace within or “Peace be with you,” as a greeting.

We recognize the need for PEACE and level places in this increasingly violent world, in our own tumultuous lives, and especially in our unsettled spirits. Yet, I ask us to reflect on this question: how can we share Christ's love or look forward to the birth of Jesus when our own emotions are anxious, fearful, and filled with worry? In our weekly Advent insert today, you'll read about a favorite hymn and its historical purpose of peacebuilding in the American Civil War. The loss of life has been devastating in Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza. Although there has always

been conflict, especially in the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures remind us: “<sup>7</sup> When people’s lives please the Lord, even their enemies are at peace with them (Prov. 16:7 <sup>NIV</sup>).” The words of Isaiah remind us that we are like grass with a short lifetime that withers and dies: “<sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” Doesn’t that build in you a sense of urgency to influence the world in some new way or to study the Scriptures more diligently? God’s words are everlasting, and they are filled with instruction and advocacy as well as comfort. What forms of justice do we need to embrace and understand to become bridgebuilders of PEACE and reconcilers rather than supporters of violence and conflict? I say, we just need a deeply personal relationship with Jesus; hope and love through him will build the peace that passes all understanding, beginning with each of us.

I think that is what John the Baptist was trying to convey in his repentance baptisms and the disciplined wilderness diet of locusts and honey and his minimal natural clothing made of camel’s hair. John was Jesus’ cousin, remember, and they first met in the womb. Later, John would go on to suffer because of his vocal advocacy; he was Christ’s Ambassador (not trained in the skills of diplomacy, however!) and he was imprisoned for sacrilege, placing someone higher in esteem than the governing king. You probably know the story of Salome and her mother’s hatred for John the Baptist which led to his gruesome death. First, we’ll meet John again in next week’s passages as we prepare to receive the one he proclaims is coming, someone greater than he or any human king, and someone for whom he is unworthy to even untie his sandals: the Messiah,

Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the ultimate embodiment of Peace and Love. Let this Advent be for you a time to be peacebuilder, and a loving prayer warrior/advocate for both global and internal peace. Shalom! And Amen! //

**Please pray with me.** All knowing and loving God, we thank you for all we have from your generous Spirit. We ask now for your peace in our world and in our lives. Help us reach out to those we don't know to share the peace that comes from salvation through Christ. May we also be Christ's Ambassador to someone who strayed from God or from the church. May we be gentle and loving in our invitation for them to seek him. It is in your Son, Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**