

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 06, 2015
Advent 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 126
Philippians 1:1-11
Luke 3:1-6

In looking at our Scripture lessons this week, I was particularly drawn back to our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. There are three strong verbs which govern the movement of this text, and they are a natural point of departure for controlling the sermon as well. Hopefully, in these verbs we can discern the voice of the Lord for all of us at Epworth this morning.

The first imperative comes to Isaiah right off the top, where he is instructed: *Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to them, tell them that their sad days are over and that their sins are pardoned.*

You may remember that God's people first heard these words when they were captives in Babylon. They had spent many years living in dire circumstances, wondering if God had abandoned them. Psalm 126, which recalls the experience of that captivity, says it well, when it observes that the people sowed a lot of tears.

The Psalm captures not merely the experience of the children of Israel, but speaks to our situation as well. Many of you sit here this morning, and the past year has seen you sow a lot of tears in your life. At times during the last year, God has seemed distant -- or even absent -- to you. You've wondered if perhaps God

has abandoned you. You feel as though you are held captive by your circumstances.

Perhaps you made some choices which seemed right at the time, but now the passing of time has changed your mind, and you now feel that you are held hostage by those choices. You'd like to see those things change, but you don't see how it can happen.

If that is you this morning, then hear this glorious good news: *You've sown many tears this year, but God is preparing to do a new thing in your life. God is preparing to restore you. Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning. You may have sown tears, but God is preparing to help you reap with joy. You may have gone out this year sowing seeds of sadness, but God is working in your life, and you are going to return home with shouts of joy.*

When I was a kid, I grew up in a home with a fair bit of dysfunction. My dad left my mom when I was very young, and a few years later she remarried. Like many families, our family struggled to express love to one another.

As I thought about it this week, it occurred to me that in all my years of growing up, I don't remember one single time when I was hurting that I was able to run to my dad or step dad, jump into his lap, and let him wrap his arms around me and hold me.

But I want you to hear something this morning. Words of comfort from Isaiah: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart” (Is. 40:11).

Wherever you may be in your life on this second Sunday of Advent, the word of the Lord for you this morning is filled with comfort. For God is preparing to do a new thing in your life.

But it does not stop there. The second strong verb that comes next in the passage is this: LISTEN.

Get on the edge of your seat this morning and listen. And as you do, you will hear a voice in the distance shouting, “Prepare the way for God’s coming.”

Indeed, God is preparing to do a new work in your life. God is preparing to restore you. But you must *actively prepare* to receive what it is that God wants to do.

The images here of filling in the valleys and leveling off the hills are metaphors for making changes in your life. They are metaphors of repentance. Farmers do not go out in the spring to plant without first plowing up the fallow ground and preparing the soil to receive the seeds which will be planted.

In a similar fashion, if we want to receive the good things that God wants to do in our lives, we must *prepare* ourselves to receive them. If you want the sun to shine on you, you must turn and face the direction from which is shining. Notice

here in the text that it is *only* when preparation has been made for what God wants to do that the glory of the Lord is revealed.

So my second task today is to say to you: LISTEN. Listen closely for the voice that says, “Prepare your life for God’s coming.” Open your heart to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he shows to you the valleys in your life that need filled in, and the hills that need to be leveled.

I’ve spoken tender words of comfort. I’ve admonished you to listen. There is one final task I’ve been given. It is simply this: to SHOUT. To proclaim to you something with such force and conviction that your ears will still be ringing long after you leave this place today.

What truth is so important that it must be shouted?

How about this: *The Lord is coming in all his power and glory.* He is coming to rule with awesome strength.

I could grab a megaphone or a bull horn today to convey this truth, but C.S. Lewis says it with more force:

Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil? Why is He not landing in force, invading it? Is it that He is not strong enough? Well, Christians think He is going to land in force; we do not know when. But we can guess why He is delaying. He wants to give us the chance of joining His side freely. I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany and then announced he was on our side. God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere

openly and directly in our world quite realise what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else -- something it never entered your head to conceive -- comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realised it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last for ever. [From Mere Christianity]

In just a few minutes we will come to the Lord's Table. Some of you, as you come, need tenderness and comfort. You need to come and let Jesus wrap his arms around you and hold you close to his heart. And you need then to actively prepare to receive the new thing he is bringing to your life.

Some of you, as you come, will need to prepare yourself for the sound of a shout. For the sound of a voice so distinct that all other voices become silent. A voice that shows you that time is short and life is short. A voice that calls on you to make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life *now*, because when he comes again the time for choosing will be past.

Truth be told, we come today for all of the above reasons. And as we come, we find that Christ is already here, waiting to meet us and give us grace where we need it most.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you have revealed yourself to us in the Scriptures; reveal yourself now also in the breaking of bread. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.