

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (B) – December 10, 2023

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

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Before I get started with what I want to talk about in this sermon I need to first deal with what I don't want to talk about, which is most of our second reading today from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. I think the ideas there of God's time and our time being different things, and the day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night can be good and helpful. But it's that image of the heavens and the earth being dissolved with fire and then replaced with new heavens and a new earth that has been misinterpreted and misused, and I can't have us read it and not say anything about it. How it has been misused is by understanding it to mean that God plans to destroy this world and then create whole new one. What that idea quickly leads to is imagining that we can do whatever we want with our environment. We can cut down all the forests, drain all of the wetlands, strip-mine and remove mountaintops to get at the coal, drill out all of the oil, and keep pumping CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, because even if climate change is real and we humans are the cause, it doesn't matter. God is going to destroy everything anyway. We don't have to take care of the earth because the earth is doomed. Here's what I think is actually going on here. Notice that the first time this dissolving fire is mentioned it's about disclosing what has been hidden. Paul uses similar imagery in his first letter to the Corinthians when he talks about how a good building will withstand a fire, while a bad one won't, and that you can't really tell if the building is good until the fire happens. And in Malachi chapter 3, which Mark is quoting in our Gospel reading, the prophet says that God is like a refining fire who will purify God's people. As in these other passages, the point of the dissolving fire in 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter is not destruction but purification, and the "new heaven and the new earth" are not recreated from nothing, but are renewed and refurbished. You might say that God is a recycler. That's all I want to say on this, I just couldn't let it pass without comment.

So, having had to talk about the fire, I now want to turn to earth and wind. Well, not earth so much as the wilderness, but close enough, and wind... well, I'll get to that in a minute. You may have noticed that wilderness is the setting for both our first and Gospel readings this week. Wilderness is a major theme in the Bible. Those of you who went through the Manna and Mercy Bible survey over the last program year will remember that the wilderness experience of the people of Israel was formative for them. It was a kind of school or training program, teaching to live as God intended them to live, by relying on and sharing both God's blessings and God's mercy. The forty years of wilderness living was an in-between time, between slavery in Egypt and taking possession of the promised land. The wilderness in our Isaiah passage today is a different wilderness, but one meant to remind them of the first one. This wilderness was the land between Babylon, where they had been held captive for 40 years, and their home. If you look on Google maps and put in Jordan, that will get you in the ballpark. Zoom out so that you can see both Jerusalem and Baghdad. Babylon was somewhere in the vicinity of Baghdad. Then click on the satellite overlay, and you will see the desert there between them. The safe way to travel in ancient times was to stick to the greener parts of the map, so going from Babylon to Jerusalem would take you up north into Syria before coming back down south into Israel. But the prophet Isaiah is talking about a highway in the desert, leading straight home. It looks like there is an actual highway there now. It's not strait, but it looks like you could drive across the desert from Iraq to Israel if you wanted to. The message of this highway imagery in Isaiah is this: You're going home now. And we're not taking the scenic route.

A colleague pointed out this past week in our text study that there are two wilderness seasons in the church year. One is Advent, and the other is Lent. The theme of Lent is testing. We start every Lent with Jesus being tested by the devil in the wilderness, and the theme continues in

both directions: both our faith and God's faithfulness are brought under examination, and both find their culmination in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The theme of Advent is different, though. It's more about transition, of leaving the old and awaiting the new, of being unsettled, a season of recognizing that what used to make sense doesn't any more, and looking and hoping for something new and better. In this connection it's helpful to know that the Hebrew word for wilderness is *MiDBaR*, which literally means "place of no word." The wilderness seasons of both Lent and Advent are times for leaving behind all of the competing words that fill our lives so that we may hear the most important word for us, God's word. And in Advent that is a word of comfort and hope.

And that leads us to the second thing I wanted to talk about: wind. In both the Hebrew of Isaiah and the Old Testament and the Greek of Mark and the New Testament, the word for wind is the same as the word for spirit and breath. That word shows up in our Isaiah reading in the breath of God in verse 7 that withers the grass and fades the flowers. But this same idea of is hidden in the opening words, "comfort." The underlying word might have to do with gasping for breath, which you do in times of distress when you need comforting. This kind of comfort is not mere sympathy. It is encouragement, breathing life back into someone, or like breathing with someone through childbirth if you've ever had the privilege of doing that.

Now if you've ever tried to comfort or encourage someone who is in distress or deep mourning, you might have gotten some pushback. It's maybe why we are so uncomfortable in such situations and try to avoid them. And that happens here in this Isaiah text. The voice tells Isaiah to comfort and encourage God's people who are held captive in Babylon. Verse 6 starts a dialog. We could have used two different readers to read this if I had thought about it soon enough. The voice says, "cry out." And Isaiah responds, "what's the point? They're not going to listen. They're not going to be faithful. They are withered grass and fading flowers." But the voice comes back, "Yes they are, but this is not about what *they* can do. This is about what *God* can do. 'The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.' You have been given that word of God to proclaim, so proclaim it. And don't tell me what God can't do. God says they have a future even when they have given up hope. So they have a future. Tell them. Comfort them. Encourage them. And have them do the same for one another.

So here we are, dear people of God, in our own wilderness, the wilderness of Advent that parallels the wilderness of our present age when we as the church seem to be withering and fading. What hope is there? What future do we have? Withering grass and fading flowers, that's what we are. And so is our whole world. The old certainties are gone. We fear for our children and grandchildren. All we hear is bad news. Our climate is becoming deadly. Democracy is losing ground to authoritarians. Wars are breaking out around the globe. Terrorism is on the rise. Our borders are overwhelmed.

It is into this wilderness that God is still speaking to us in Jesus Christ, the one who is still coming, the one who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, the holy wind, the holy breath of life. We have been given this word to proclaim and to trust. Things were just as dire for his people when he first appeared on earth, and they got even worse for them after that. But through it all he was with them as he is with us still. I do not know what the future will bring, and things may indeed get worse for us in the immediate future. But God is with us now in Jesus, in this place, in these gatherings to speak words of comfort, encouragement, and promise, and to send us out as agents of hope to the world God still loves. We have a future because God says we do. And when God says things, they happen, sooner or later. May we cling to that promise and that hope in these wilderness days. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.