

2nd Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.”

And, “A voice cries out:

‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

Today’s lessons begin with this passage from the prophet Isaiah that is especially familiar to many of us because it’s used in Handel’s *Messiah*. While Isaiah was speaking these encouraging words at a very different time, to the dispersed Hebrews in Babylon and elsewhere, the very earliest Christians used these prophetic words to refer to Christ’s birth, and his second coming. That is why we have them in our Advent lectionary, along with Mark’s quotation of it, and his description of John the Baptist. We are to take comfort in these words, and in this story, as we wait for Christ’s arrival.

However, the character of John the Baptist is anything but comforting, if we consider his person, and his way of life. He was a prophet and an ascetic—someone who denied himself most forms of comfort in order to draw closer to God. He often fasted, and when he did eat, apparently he ate locusts and wild honey. Locusts are high in protein, and are eaten all over the world, but if you eat them in the wilderness, you have to catch them first. And if you’re taking honey out of a wild hive, you have to find it first—and you might get a few stings. Also, living in the desert wilderness, John very likely seldom bathed, except for ritual hand washing before eating. And the camel skin that he wore was probably also seldom washed. So picture this lean, bearded, dirty, wild-looking man calling people to repent of their sins and be baptized.

So he was not comforting, but apparently John's evident sincerity, and the holiness of his life led many people to listen to his preaching. Some even thought he might be the Messiah. But he made it clear that he was not the spiritual and military leader who was foretold, saying, "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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John was not the way, but he knew the way, and that soon everyone would also know it.

By the example of his life and words John led the people of his time and place to see that Jesus was the way. Like John, we are not the way, but we *know* the way. We know that Jesus, who came into the world to save sinners like us, loves us and wants us to share that love with everyone. We don't need to become ascetics, or eat locusts, although if you want some, Amazon does sell a bag of dried locusts for \$9.99. No we don't need to be prophets like John—but we do need to live our faith, not just to say it on Sundays. We need to reconcile with one another; to treat one another with respect; to give to those who have less than we do; to work for justice and peace.

In Advent we remember that we are a people in waiting for the Christ. We might not be in a literal wilderness, but in many ways our culture is a wilderness of injustice, incivility, and apathy to sin. We can stand in today's wilderness and welcome everyone to journey with us, to wait with us, to love with us as we love God, and one another. Not that we are better than everyone, but that God is better—and God loves us all.

Like John the Baptist, we are not the way, but we know the way. We walk the way together as we await the coming of Jesus. Amen.

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