



### Introduction

*John calls people to repent, to clear the decks, to completely reorder their lives so that nothing gets in the way of the Lord's coming. The reading from Isaiah gives the context for this radical call: the assurance of forgiveness that encourages us to repent; the promise that the coming one will be gentle with the little ones. Isaiah calls us all to be heralds with John, to lift up our voices fearlessly and say, "See, your God is coming!" We say it to one another in worship, in order to say it with our lives in a world in need of justice and peace.*

### Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity,  
Father, ✝ Son, and Holy Spirit, one God,  
whose forgiveness is sure and whose steadfast love endures forever. **Amen.**

Together let us honestly and humbly confess  
that we have not lived as God desires.

*Silence is kept for reflection.*

Loving and forgiving God,  
**we confess that we are held captive by sin.**  
**In spite of our best efforts, we have gone astray.**  
**We have not welcomed the stranger;**  
**we have not loved our neighbor;**  
**we have not been Christ to one another.**  
**Restore us, O God. Wake us up and turn us from our sin.**  
**Renew us each day in the light of Christ. Amen.**

People of God, hear this glad news:  
by God's endless grace your sins are forgiven,  
and you are free—free from all that holds you back  
and free to live in the peaceful kingdom of God.  
May you be strengthened in God's love,  
✝ comforted by Christ's peace,  
and accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

**Gathering Hymn ELW # 257 (vs 3-4) / LBW 34 (vs 1, 3)**

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

*Listen and sing along [here](#).*

## Prayer of the Day

Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son. By his coming strengthen us to serve you with purified lives; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

## First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

*In grand, flowing, poetic lines, the prophet announces that the exile of God's people in Babylon is over. God will deliver Israel and will care for her as a shepherd cares for the sheep. This word can be trusted, because the only enduring reality in life is the word of God.*

*Read the text [here](#).*

## Psalmody: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

<sup>1</sup>You have been gracious to your land, O LORD;  
you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup>**You have forgiven the iniquity of your people  
and blotted out all their sins.**

<sup>8</sup>I will listen to what the LORD God is saying;  
for you speak peace to your faithful people  
and to those who turn their hearts to you.

<sup>9</sup>**Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you,  
that your glory may dwell in our land.**

<sup>10</sup>Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together;  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

<sup>11</sup>**Faithfulness shall spring up from the earth,  
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.**

<sup>12</sup>The LORD will indeed grant prosperity,  
and our land will yield its increase.

<sup>13</sup>**Righteousness shall go before the LORD  
and shall prepare for God a pathway.**

## Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

*The Gospel of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus' birth but with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.*

*Read the text [here](#).*

## Reflection on the Text

Whenever I hear those first words from Isaiah 40, I remember an elbow jabbing my side. I was sitting next to my husband Ray's uncle in the funeral home chapel during a family funeral. Just as the preacher was about to begin speaking, Uncle Jim poked me with his elbow and whispered to me, "He's going to start with 'Comfort, O comfort my people.'" And indeed, those were the first words the preacher said! As a Southern Baptist preacher himself and a part-time employee of that same funeral home, Uncle Jim had undoubtedly heard that same preacher speak many times before, and maybe even begun funeral sermons with those same words himself.

The Lord does indeed call prophets and preachers to "Comfort, O comfort my people" - especially during difficult times. This may be the first pandemic we remember, but it isn't the first one in the history of our country or the world. And of course there have been other hard times. Revolutionary War, Civil War, World Wars, and more. Economic challenges like the Great Depression. And the Spanish Flu epidemic that began in 1918.

Hearing Isaiah's words again reminds us that we need comfort during difficult times; and that comfort comes from the assurance that God has not abandoned us, but is with us through all the difficult days. Isaiah tells us that a voice cries out for the way of the Lord to be prepared in the wilderness - right through the mountains and the desert. This preparation was God's work, far beyond human powers.

Even now the most skilled road construction crews do not lift up every valley or lower mountains and hills to make perfectly straight and level roads. Preparations like that would reveal the glory of God as he arrived in power and might to care lovingly for the people like a flock of sheep.

We read this passage from Isaiah for another reason today, not just for that timely reminder of the comfort God's people have received over and over again from God, but also because it is quoted by Mark in the very first chapter as he begins his account of the "good news of Jesus Christ."

Mark skips completely over the whole 'tiny baby born in Bethlehem' part of the story as he begins the gospel by quoting from Isaiah to introduce John the Baptist as the messenger who would prepare the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He goes on to describe John's clothing and his unusual diet before sharing his method of preparing the way. John was not building a smooth wide road through the mountains. But he was living in the wilderness, drawing crowds who came from villages and even from the great city of Jerusalem to hear his words.

John did not preach a soothing message of comforting words. Instead, along with his message of repentance, he told them that someone more powerful was coming, who would baptize them - and all of us - not with just water, but with the Holy Spirit!

John might as well have been bulldozing hills and blasting mountaintops. These were powerful, probably frightening words. Yet many people came to see and hear him. Living in a time of oppression by the Roman government, the people struggled to keep the faith and to feel God's presence with them. They must have yearned to hear that something – anything - was about to change. That God was up to something new in the world. Those words that John used, which sound frightening to us, must have brought them hope, because they gathered at the river to be baptized in the waters of repentance and to hear the promise that something was about to change.

We live in difficult times too. We welcome words of comfort and promise too! Advances in treatment for coronavirus and other illnesses that plague us give us comfort. The promise that a vaccine for the virus is nearly ready gives us hope for better days ahead. We watch the news for descriptions of the preparations that are already underway.

But the real news that John the Baptist shared is timeless news. It is just the beginning, as Mark says, of the good news of Jesus Christ. Yes, God was at work in the world then and is still at work in the world. Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem as a human baby, appears in Mark's gospel as a full-grown man, soon after this description of John preparing the way for him.

Mark goes on to urgently tell the story of Jesus, moving from his baptism through his earthly ministry, and then his suffering, death, and resurrection, just as quickly as he can. The real good news comes as Mark's gospel draws to a close. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth to show us God's love in a very real and tangible way, was raised from the dead. And then the good news about what God had done through Jesus continued to spread throughout the world as more and more people heard the good news and were baptized in water - and received the Holy Spirit - and began to share the good news with others.

That message of good news continues today – as we share the message not just with our words, but with our actions. With our presence in our community, with our work in the world as God's hands serving others. With our loving words spreading the message of God's love for all of creation and telling others about God's plan for Christ to return again to restore all of creation.

Those are words and actions that bring comfort for all of God's people. And through those words and actions, we join John the Baptist and all the faithful throughout time in the all-important of preparing the way for our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

**Hymn of the Day ELW # 249 / LBW # 36 *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry***

*Listen and sing along [here](#).*

## Nicene Creed

*We profess our faith with the whole church in all times and places:*

**We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.**

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God, begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary  
and became truly human .  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

## Prayers of Intercession

God of power and might, tear open the heavens and come quickly to this weary world.  
Hear our prayers for everyone in need.

*A brief silence.*

Faithful God, you teach us to wait for you with faithfulness and patience. Sustain and support us in our doubts and questions. Nurture our faith as we discern and enact your mission. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Loving God, you set the stars in the sky and breathe life into the earth. Renew the face of creation where it is in need of your healing touch. Mend the wounds of environmental damage and restore balance to ecosystems so that all creation can declare your praise. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Steadfast God, you never tire of seeking justice. Where people suffer from discrimination, judgment, and injustice, speak words of truth and comfort. Lead us toward a world where faithfulness will sprout underfoot and righteousness rain down from above. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Leading God, you ask us to make uneven ground smooth. Make even the disparities between your people. Sustain and support people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Accompany those who advocate for the disabled and work for a world accessible to all. Teach us to celebrate the great diversity in our midst. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Tender God, you know sorrow and joy alike. We pray for those in our families and communities who are not joyful in this holiday season. Comfort those who grieve, be a companion to all who are lonely, tend those who are sick or struggling with depression, and gather all people in your healing embrace. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

*Here other intercessions may be offered.*

Eternal God, we give thanks for the saints who have prepared your way in the wilderness and taught us to continue their faithful work. Make their generous lives an example for all. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Lord's Prayer**

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

**Closing Hymn ELW # 256 / LBW # 29      *Comfort, Comfort Now My People***

*Listen and sing along [here](#).*

Worship adapted from sundaysandseasons.com. Copyright © 2020 Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission under Augsburg Fortress Liturgies Annual License #SAS027356.

Today's reflection was written by Pastor Ruth Ann Sipe.