

Second Weekend of Advent (RCL/B): "Go Home!"  
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8  
December 5-6, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

When's the last time you or the person you were talking to started a statement with, "Good news!" "Good news! The forecast for Sunday morning is clear and in the 50's!" "Good news! Amazon has exactly what I was looking for and it should arrive tomorrow!" "Good news! We have enough left-overs for tonight's dinner!" Of course, some "Good news!" messages are of greater importance than others, like: "Good news! I got a second interview!" "Good news! They accepted our offer on the house!" "Good news! The baby arrived safely!" "Good news! The COVID test was negative!" "Good news! They've found a vaccine!" (Actually, a whole series of vaccines....)

There's mention of good news/good tidings in our first lesson from Isaiah (Isa. 40:9).

Here's the paraphrase from *The Message* of what we heard:

*Climb a high mountain, Zion.  
You're the preacher of good news.  
Raise your voice. Make it good and loud, Jerusalem.  
You're the preacher of good news.  
Speak loud and clear. Don't be timid!  
Tell the cities of Judah,  
"Look! Your God!"*

This would be not just "good" news but the **best** news ever to people who wondered just where their God had gone. This assignment to "*Comfort, O comfort my people*" (Isa. 40:1a) comes from a God whom the people of Israel hauled off into captivity in Babylon feared had abandoned them. They weren't just taken prisoner and relocated to a foreign country, though that would have been bad enough. They also knew that the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, reduced to rubble. The Temple was the place where the priests offered sacrifice on their behalf to ask God's forgiveness, to seek God's blessing, to say "Thank You." There was no substitute for Temple worship. It was not a "movable feast," like our Sunday 10:30 worship outdoors. The people in

captivity weren't so sure that when they were forcibly relocated, their God went along with them. Their God actually seemed pretty ticked off with them.

The prophets made it clear that the catalyst for Babylon's catastrophic overrun of Judah in 586 B.C., destruction of Jerusalem, and carrying off of the Jewish educated elite was pretty clearly the people's own sin: trusting military might rather than God, consorting with pagan nations, mistreatment of the poor and abuse of the vulnerable. **But** the time of tough love was at an end.

God announces through the prophet (Isa. 40:1-2, *The Message*):

*1-2 "Comfort, oh comfort my people,"  
says your God.  
"Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem,  
but also make it very clear  
that she has served her sentence,  
that her sin is taken care of—forgiven!  
She's been punished enough and more than enough,  
and now it's over and done with."*

The people of Israel's exile in a foreign land (once called Babylonia, now Iraq) is almost over. The next chapter of the story will be "Homecoming." The exiled people of Israel are given the green light to return home. They must travel between here and there, though, traversing the wilderness, making "*straight in the desert a highway for our God.*" (Isaiah 40:3c)

*"Fill in the valleys,  
level off the hills,  
Smooth out the ruts,  
clear out the rocks.  
Then GOD's bright glory will shine  
and everyone will see it.  
Yes. Just as GOD has said."* (Isaiah 40:4-5, *The Message*)

Have you ever driven into a pothole so massive it threatened to break the wheel axle or swallow your car whole? Have you ever driven up such a steep incline that your car or truck almost refused to go forward and you were afraid it might grind to a halt? Have you ever driven down such a steep hill that you were on high alert in case you had to engage the emergency brake

to prevent your vehicle from hurtling forward? These are travel conditions that slow the journey. God says to God's people: "Eliminate the hairpin turns! Streamline the journey! Fill in the potholes! Reduce the steep grades! Initiate EZ Pass so you don't waste time waiting in line at the toll booth! Haven't you been gone from home long enough? Don't you want to make it home fast?"

**We** ease our journey Home, **we** "*prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*" (Mark 1:3b-c), by identifying and confessing **our** sin, asking God's forgiveness for our failures in love, turning over a new leaf, having a change of heart, as John the Baptist invited people to do nearly 2,000 years ago. Ultimately it's the Holy Spirit who makes any of that possible, just like it was the Spirit who moved Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered the Babylonians who conquered Judah, to allow the Jews to go back home. It's the Holy Spirit who enables us to see where we're wrong: wrong because of what we're doing or wrong because of what we're **not** doing. It's the Holy Spirit who gives us courage to see ourselves as God sees us, to 'fess up to our spiritual shortcomings, our worldly greed, our lack of faith in God, our faithlessness in relationships.

We suffer the **natural** consequences of our sins but we don't have to suffer their **eternal** consequences, because of the suffering lovingly accepted, the saving death and glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. On our journey toward greater communion with Him, on our holy pilgrimage through this earthly life toward everlasting Life, we are lovingly accompanied. We are not just traveling **toward** God, we are traveling **with** God. This God sometimes points out we are taking unnecessary detours, dangerous paths, dubious routes; by God's grace we are sometimes able to hear and heed the warnings. Regardless of our receptivity (or lack thereof) to divine travel directives, though, this is still the One who sticks with us all the way through the valley of the shadow into the Light. Good News indeed! Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

