

## **Advent-2-b2008**

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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC

Second Sunday of Advent

8

December 7, 2008

**Isaiah 40.1-11**

Mark 1.1-

Advent Prophecy II:

“Behold your God!”

“Here is your God!”

—Isaiah 40.9

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

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### From Cry To Encounter

We continue today with our Advent wanderings through the familiar prophecies from the book of Isaiah. Martin Luther said of the lessons of this season that they “dance with promises.” Today we continue what we began last week: trying to get in step with that dance, that we might better understand the significance of Advent, and as a result, of Christmas.

Last week we heard from the prophet a cry to God—the cry of a people locked in sin and isolated from God, a cry for forgiveness:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence...  
But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid  
yourself we transgressed. (Isaiah 64.1,5)

In that cry, we heard as well a distant but distinct echo of hope:

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and  
you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.  
(64.8)

With this week's lesson that echo becomes stronger, louder, and easier to hear. We have moved one step further on our Advent journey. Our move from last week to this week is a move from cry to encounter—from a desperate cry for help to a dramatic encounter with God.

### The Turning Point (vv. 1-2)

Today we are in Isaiah, Chapter 40. This might be a good day to use your pew Bibles (page 816), as we'll be doing a close reading of the text. The turning point in this Advent move from cry to encounter comes not from a change in the circumstances of the prophet's life, but

rather it comes as a change in God's attitude toward the people. As you will recall, the prophet that we hear in this part of the book of Isaiah lived during a time when the Israelites were exiles in Babylon.

Jerusalem had been destroyed, Isaiah and his people had been deported, forced to live under hard circumstances in a strange land.

None of this had changed, and yet the prophet felt compelled by God to speak words of comfort to his people:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...

But the Isaiah does not restrict himself to words that merely soothe or pacify—he announces a change:

...and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. (40.1-2)

Isaiah says to his people that their warfare, or their tour of duty, has ended. Using the image of military service, he announces to them that they have received a discharge, an honorable discharge, from the suffering they have borne for their sinfulness.

He could appeal to no visible evidence to confirm his words; they were still captives. But he could declare that a more important change, upon which all else depends, had taken place—he could declare that God had turned to his people in pity and love. Isaiah’s words are words of assurance—assurance that God has not forgotten his people, but that God had already begun work for their deliverance.

Isaiah couldn’t point to the events of history; nothing had changed yet. He could only point to the disposition of God, for there something had changed. But how could any human being, even a prophet, claim to know about God’s disposition? On what basis does Isaiah make such wild pronouncements of comfort? He is able to speak because he has had an encounter, a personal encounter, with God. That encounter is the key to understanding today’s passage.

### The Encounter (vv. 6-8)

There is no comprehending the Biblical prophets apart from their encounter with God. In the case of the prophet before us today, Isaiah,

as in the case of all the Biblical prophets, “a strong sense of divine compulsion lay at the heart of the [prophet’s] call.” (Brevard Childs) Isaiah didn’t wake up one morning and decide to comfort his people—God compelled him to speak this word of comfort, just as God compelled the prophets to speak words of judgment.

The prophet’s perspective shattering conversation with God is recorded in verses 6 to 8 of the 40th chapter:

A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. (40.6-8)

This conversation records, in the briefest of possible ways, a conflict of two opposing wills—the will of God and the will of the prophet. God says, “Cry!”, and Isaiah answers, “What shall I cry?” Isaiah can see nothing worth crying, nothing worth saying, nothing worth preaching to the people. He follows with a bitterly pessimistic assessment of the human condition, comparing human existence to the grass which fades and the flowers that wither.

And yet, even with his pessimistic view of human life, perhaps even because of it, Isaiah is led to renewed faith and hope in God: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.” For Isaiah, knowledge of human weakness and frailty leads to reliance on God whose word cannot fail.

Human life and relationships can be full of disappointments. I have heard from many people the loss of faith they have experienced as a result of being hurt by a loved one, betrayed by a trusted friend, or disappointed by a religious leader. Human dealings are full of occasions that disappoint. Even when we are trying to do good, we so often seem to end up hurting each other’s feelings. Whether at work, or at church, or at home—a faith that is based merely on human nature is destined to be a fragile faith indeed.

In his encounter with God, Isaiah saw that human frailty and sinfulness are not the bottom line. In a dramatic way, he learned that faith in God is not the same thing as faith in human goodness—one withers and fades, the other will stand forever. In his encounter with

God, Isaiah became able to speak words of comfort and hope, when before he could only see bitter defeat. He experienced God and his perspective changed. That change is the basis for his whole message to the people of Israel.

### The Results Of The Encounter (vv. 3-5 and 9-11)

Isaiah found confidence in the word of God. In God's word he found something firm in the midst of life that seemed fleeting. But his encounter with God was not the end of the prophet's journey, it was only the beginning. Isaiah had found a new trust in God, a reason for comfort and hope. But this comfort and hope had implications—implications for the prophet, and for his people as well.

Isaiah's comfort was not a call to sit back and wait for God to take care of things. The message of comfort contained within itself a call to action—a call to prepare and to proclaim. As a result of his encounter with God, Isaiah uttered the words that would later be repeated by John the Baptist:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (40.3)

Isaiah believed that God was coming to save his people, but it was the people's job to get ready to receive him. By calling for them to build a highway in the desert, Isaiah brought to their mind the special roads that the Babylonians built to parade their kings and gods before the citizenry.

Isaiah called the people to prepare themselves to be delivered. Just as the Babylonians cleared away obstacles so that their idols could be seen by all, the Israelites were to clear away the obstacles that prevented God from being seen in their lives:

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. (40.4)

I have always figured that Isaiah must have been from somewhere like Iowa or Nebraska—the one who wrote those words could never have been happy in a mountainous state like Washington, where I grew up. But Isaiah didn't just have a thing against mountains. He simply used the image of a clear plain to stand for lives that were unobstructed and ready to receive the Lord.

Isaiah called the people of Israel to be the construction crew to get things ready for the arrival of God on the scene of history. They also had a second responsibility—they were to announce God’s coming to all the land:

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” (40.9)

As the watchman in ancient times mounted the highest tower to catch the first glimpse of the returning king, so Israel itself is to give first notice of the coming of the all powerful God. And yet, the all powerful and mighty God is also gentle like a shepherd who feeds his flock and gathers his lambs. Our passage began with comfort and ends with gracious care. In its very structure, today’s reading reflects the unity of the divine purpose—the graciousness of a loving God to a beloved people.

Isaiah told his people to declare to all the world, “Here is your God!” I’m not generally old-fashioned about language, but in this case I prefer the more majestic translation of the King James and Revised Standard versions: “Behold your God!” In these words the prophet does the best he can to share the encounter with God that so drastically changed his life and his understanding of the world. As we move on into Advent, Isaiah nudges us toward a new and closer encounter with God. We are to prepare ourselves to meet God anew at Christmas, and then to share what we’ve found with other people.

For those of us who have begun to follow Jesus Christ, Isaiah’s words, “Behold your God!” do more than testify to an ancient prophet’s spirituality. “Behold your God!” announces the good news of the Advent season: God has appeared in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Immanuel—God with us—for which Israel longed. He is the royal way out of servitude and into the promised land. We can begin down that path simply by beholding Christ anew—but beware, we may never be the same again!

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Let us pray: We are here today, O Lord, to behold you.

We aren't here to explain you or to use you or to domesticate you or even to understand you. We are just here to behold—to BE in your presence and to let that presence transform us.

Amen.