

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hymns: 60, 61, 55, 62

The INTROIT

(Is.45:8; Ps.19:1)

P: Drop down, ye heavens, from above:
C: and let the skies pour down righteousness.
P: Let the earth open:
C: and bring forth salvation.
P: The heavens declare the glory of God:
C: and the firmament showeth His handiwork.

(The "Gloria in Excelsis" is omitted during the Penitential Season of Advent)

The COLLECT

Stir up O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, succor us that by the help of Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The FIRST LESSON

Isaiah 40:1-8

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

The GRADUAL

(Ps. 145:18,21; 40:17b)

P: The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him:
C: to all that call upon Him in truth.
P: My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord:
C: and let all flesh bless His holy name. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
P: Thou art my Help and my Deliverer:
C: make no tarrying, O my God. Hallelujah!

Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

The SENTENCE for the Season

(Psalm 25:6)

P: Hallelujah! Remember, O Lord, Thy tender mercies:

C: for they have been ever of old. Hallelujah!

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 1:19-28 (NKJV)

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.

Then said they unto him, Who art thou? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?

He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.

And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?

John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

(Joh 1:23) εφη^{G5346 V-IAI-3S} εγω^{G1473 P-1NS} φωνη^{G5456 N-NSF} βοωντος^{G994 V-PAP-GSM} εν^{G1722 PREP}
 τη^{G3588 T-DSF} ερημω^{G2048 A-DSF} ευθυνατε^{G2116 V-AAM-2P} την^{G3588 T-ASF} οδον^{G3598 N-ASF} κυριου^{G2962 N-GSM}
 καθως^{G2531 ADV} ειπεν^{G3004 V-2AAI-3S} ησαιας^{G2268 N-NSM} ο^{G3588 T-NSM} προφητης^{G4396 N-NSM}

Isaiah 40:1-8 — “Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for Our God”

INTRODUCTION

I. COMFORT YE, COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE, SAITH YOUR GOD

II. MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD

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Isaiah 40:1-8 — “Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for Our God”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent and the Old Testament reading appointed for this day is Isaiah 40:1-8:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Four more days till Christmas. Are you prepared? Preparation is the theme of the texts appointed in the pericopal readings for this Fourth Sunday in Advent. Are you prepared for Christmas? What does this question mean to you when you hear it? This is the question presented in our texts. What does it really mean to be prepared for Christmas? It is really quite a wonderful question. The answer is even more wonderful!

I. COMFORT YE, COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE, SAITH YOUR GOD

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

In every age, this is what people long to hear. In every age, trouble has loomed before the peoples. In every age the greedy have taken unfair advantage of the hard working people. In every age those in control of the market and of the money have exploited the poor and the common folk. In every age the people have struggled to get by. In every age the people have sought and desired to hear a word of comfort in their times of distress, a word of comfort to soothe their worried souls.

Today we hear a Double Word of Comfort! The Word of the LORD to His people is given and then repeated. This double Word of Comfort is given through Isaiah. Then it is repeated in the Gospel reading as John the Baptist proclaims it in the desert, even as Isaiah promised. Then Saint Paul reiterates it in the Epistle to the Philippians. Yes, the desire and need for this Word of Comfort has existed in every age. More importantly, it has been richly supplied by the LORD in every age. The LORD spoke this Word of Comfort to the first pair of sinners in the garden and has repeated it over and over in every generation since.

The absolute consistency of the Holy Scriptures is a wonder to behold. Of course, in order to recognize this consistency, one must first hear the message of Comfort to which the Scriptures consistently point. Without hearing this ceaseless and never changing Word of Comfort, the Scriptures appear to be a disjointed and conflicting compilation of pitiful expressions of mankind. But when the Scriptures are heard as the continuous record and testimony of the Word of Comfort, then the consistency and integrity of the Scriptures is unmistakably obvious and clear and the everlasting comfort of God's mercy and love flow without end from this written record of God's will and Word.

St. Paul demonstrates this integrity of the Scriptures as he speaks encouragement and comfort to the saints in Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Do you hear it? St. Paul writes of the effect of the double Comfort spoken by Isaiah. Isaiah proclaims from the LORD, **“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.”** St. Paul admonishes, **“Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I will say, Rejoice!”** Those who know the Comfort that Isaiah prophesies truly know the meaning of rejoicing in the Lord always. The LORD has ended the warfare that Satan started and tempted Man to enter. The LORD has taken the warfare upon Himself and has ended it by sacrificing Himself for us. The death that Adam chose for us the LORD has taken so that in Christ Jesus there is no more war between us and God. The saints have been pardoned of their iniquity. The cause for the war has been removed for all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus. This is the Word of Comfort spoken by the promise of the birth of Jesus of Mary. St. Paul says, **“The Lord is at hand!”** Yes, the LORD has come to us in the flesh. He gives Himself for us in His flesh and blood. This is the great Comfort of the Christ Mass. This is the very purpose of Christmas. This is the reason for the season. O come, O come, Immanuel! With us God, in flesh and blood, for our forgiveness and renewal in His Holy Communion.

“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people!” says your God.

II. MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the

crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

In response to those who demanded of John that he tell them who he is John declared, **“I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.”** John is merely a voice of the one crying in the wilderness. So who is the one crying in the wilderness? Remember the earlier prophecy of Isaiah. **““Comfort ye, comfort ye My people!” says your God.”**

It is the LORD God Himself who cries out in the wilderness through the voice of the preacher. It is the LORD who calls out continually to every generation with the Word of Comfort and forgiveness and life.

Why is the LORD calling out in the wilderness? Consider to whom He is calling out. To whom IS He calling out? He is calling out to Jerusalem, to His people. He is calling out to those who have refused to hear Him. He is calling out to those who have rejected His pure means of grace so that He is not found among them. For God is present where His Gospel and Sacraments are administered purely. However, over and over again, Jerusalem, the people of God, the place of His temple and of the sacrifices, turned away to other ways and other means. Thus the LORD had to call to them from outside of Jerusalem in the desert. He had to call to them apart from the changes that they had made regarding the pure worship life that He had commanded for them. He had to call to them out and away from the false teachers and the corrupt leaders.

When the Church stops listening to the LORD, when the Church can no longer hear the LORD over their own words of praise and worship, the LORD raises up a voice through which He cries out to His Church from the wilderness.

Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

This word for highway is from the same root word that is used in Genesis 28 for what is often mislabeled as Jacob’s ladder.

And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. (Genesis 28:10-16)

At the top of the ladder or highway stands the LORD. At the bottom of the ladder, looking up without a clue, is Man. We all, like Jacob, must honestly confess, **“Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not.”**

Like Jacob, we all need to hear the Word of Comfort proclaimed again and again. That Word of Comfort is that the LORD comes to us by means of the ladder or highway that descends from heaven to earth, the ladder that the angels descend and ascend and the ladder by which the LORD Himself comes to us.

That ladder or highway must be made straight, that is, it must be set forth firmly upon the earth without any compromise in its attachment to the world. The Greek word for this highway is *hodos*, translated as the Way. From other passages of Scripture we recognize this way of the LORD as being the very person of Jesus. The LORD Jesus says of Himself, **“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”** The Scriptures also declare Jesus to be *Immanuel*, with us God. Yes, Jesus is the highway that must be preached straightly and not crookedly. Jesus is the Way that must be preached without twisting Him to fit whatever seems right to the preacher or to the people. The babe of Bethlehem must be proclaimed as the flesh and blood LORD God Almighty, come to earth as Man with Man to dwell and to give His life as a ransom for many.

III. “What Shall I Cry?”

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Wait! The voice said, **“Cry!”** And he said, **“What shall I cry?”**

If the preacher in the wilderness says **“Cry!”** to whom is he speaking? Who is it that responds, **“What shall I cry?”**

If we go back to the beginning of our text we hear that Jerusalem or the people of God or the Church is the focus of the Word of Comfort. So then, who is this that the voice in the wilderness commands to cry out and who responds asking to know what to cry? Consider the answer that is given:

All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Only the Word of our God shall stand forever. All else withers and fades away. But the Word of our God shall stand forever. The voice in the wilderness cries out with the Word of the LORD to the preachers of the Church. The preachers have stopped preaching straightly the Way of the LORD. The preachers of the Church have stopped preaching the pure Gospel and have begun to mingle other things in their preaching. The preachers have stopped preaching the straightness of the way and have begun to preach the straightness of the people and of the church leadership and of the various programs. And the problem with the straightness of these is that these ways do not deliver the LORD to the people but deliver something else. These ways do not

have their beginning in heaven with the angels descending and ascending to bring the glad tidings of Christmas. Rather, these ways have their beginnings in hell and in the deceptions of the sinful human heart, and what they deliver is the hellish deception that man does not live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God but by other means. And so the people are not given the Word of Comfort again and again as the LORD had ordained. Rather than being directed to the double blessing of the Comfort of the administration of the pure Gospel and the pure Sacraments, the people are taught how to live and how to strive to be better Christians and better witnesses and better givers in support of God's kingdom.

To all of this the answer is given to those who inquire to know **“What shall I cry?”**

All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Truly, the wonderful Word of Comfort must be accompanied by and even preceded by the harsh Word of condemnation. The strong Word of rebuke must be spoken without compromise so that the people despair of their own efforts and their own worship and praise so that they trust only in the Word of God which stands forever.

At this time of the year the wind blows hard and it blows very coldly. The bitter cold wind wilts the grass just as quickly as the scorching hot wind. The *Ruach* of the LORD, that is the wind or Spirit of the LORD, wilts the human ego both when the scorching heat of the Law is proclaimed as well as when the blistering cold of the pronouncement of the LORD's absence is pronounced. This is what the voice in the wilderness declares. Those who depend on anything other than the pure Word and Sacraments do not have the presence of the LORD among them. He comes only through the straightly administered Way. He comes through water and Spirit and body and blood, both in connection with the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

CONCLUSION

Oh that the modern preachers and evangelists would hear the call of the LORD through Isaiah and John and St. Paul. If only all the preachers and evangelists would straightly preach the Way of the LORD. But thanks be to God that in every time and place He calls in the wilderness, calling out to the Church through His voices in the wilderness. Thanks be to God that He does not wait for us to repent before He calls out and takes action on our behalf. The LORD did not wait for the church leaders to begin preaching rightly when He sent Gabriel to Zacharias and then to Mary. The LORD did not wait for Herod or for the chief priests in Jerusalem to preach rightly before arranging the census that caused Joseph to carry Mary and her unborn Son to Bethlehem, and then sent angels to preach to the shepherds, and also created a star to shine unto the entire world with the announcement of the birth of the King of the Jews and Savior of mankind.

No, the LORD our God continues to call out to His Church from the wilderness. He continues to call us all to recognize that all flesh is but grass and the godliness of our fleshly efforts is but a flower in the field, the glory of which immediately fades as the Holy Spirit causes the Law to show the corruption and sinfulness of our every thought, word, and deed. Thanks be to God that He does not stop declaring this to us. Thanks be to God that He continues to show us the folly of our own hearts and our own ways, so that we will be moved to repent and trust His Word that stands forever. Truly we are blessed to hear the cry to prepare the way of the LORD and to make straight in the desert the highway of our God. Moreover, we are blessed to hear that

He comes to us this very day. We do not even have to wait, for He is with us as we gather in His name. He has given Himself to us in Baptism and He comes to us with His body and blood that is prepared on His table. Trust His Word that stands forever. Trust His Word that declares that He has ended the warfare and has pardoned the iniquity. Come to His table to receive Him through the way that has been prepared. His Word has been preached and you have heard it. His forgiveness awaits you to be administered in the bread and wine. The highway has been set before you straightly. The LORD is at hand. Rejoice! And again I will say Rejoice! Indeed! Comfort ye, Comfort ye, My people. Thus says the LORD your God. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.