

A Faith That's Faithful

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1: 1-8

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Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

A voice of one calling:

*"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord[a];
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.[b]*

*Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.*

*And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.*

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out."

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

*"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.*

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.*

Surely the people are grass.

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."*

*You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.*

*You who bring good news to Jerusalem,[c]
lift up your voice with a shout,*

*lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*

*See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.*

*See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.*

*He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms*

*and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.*

Mark 1:1-8

1 *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,[a] the Son of God,[b]* **2** *as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”[c]—
“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”[d]*

4 *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with[e] water, but he will baptize you with[f] the Holy Spirit.”*

To start off here, I want to share our memory verse for this month, which is also the focal point of this sermon. It’s Isaiah 40, verse 8.

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.”*

I encourage you to “write this verse on your heart,” as scripture says. Say it at the beginning and end of each day, I’ve heard some of you are saying it before dinner, write it down and put it on your bathroom mirror. Keep this verse close to you this month.

I’m going to share an unpopular opinion. People can be disappointing. I realize that this isn’t the season to be saying that. We talk about people of goodwill, how we all make an extra effort to be kind at Christmas. That’s true, and yet, people can be disappointing. That’s a statement with absolutely no nuance, so I’ll give a little. And no, 2020 isn’t turning me into a misanthropic pastor, although it’s hard not to be at least a little that way given our current reality. I love people, I’m a people person. I think we can see the face of God in one another. People are fantastic.

But sooner or later, someone is going to let you down, no matter how much “stock” you put into people and their abilities. Your spouse will let you down, a mentor, a friend, someone in government...it’s destined to happen at some point. I don’t say this to bash on people. I know I’ve disappointed people at times in my life, and I’m sure you have, too.

I say this, but I also realize it’s not a very good thing to focus on. If we wasted all our headspace on who we’re disappointing or who is disappointing us, we probably wouldn’t have headspace for much else. I think perfectionists have a particularly difficult time

with this. If the goal is perfection, soon enough perfection stops being perfect enough. There's always a flaw somewhere. So there's my statement, with a little bit of nuance, people can disappoint.

Typically during Advent we talk about "cleaning house." Lots of Children's Times are focused on how one prepares for a guest and how one cleans up. I always thought that analogy funny, because at my house, we just shove everything in a closet. Somehow the idea of shoving everything in a closet before Jesus gets here doesn't put me in the Advent spirit. And honestly, some of us might be a little too tired to clean at the moment. It's great if you have that energy, but I'm wanting to say there are other parts of Advent we overlook.

There are a lot of passages we could focus on this Sunday. This Sunday's theme is "On the road to repentance." Our gospel passage from the story of John the Baptist points to this. Brian embodied John the Baptist in our monologue for today with just the kind of hat John the Baptist would be wearing if he were alive today and living in Canada. This passage from Isaiah focuses on sundry topics, and, one of those is preparing the way. One could argue that repentance has a lot to do with making preparations. But I want to focus on something a little different.

I want to go back to that people aspect I talked about before. And also bring in Isaiah 40: 6-8.

*All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
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but the word of our God endures forever."*

We put our trust and faith in a lot of things. We trust our car to get us where we need to go in a safe manner, we trust banks to do what they do, we trust grocery stores to have what we need. But we, beloved children of God, are looking for faith. More importantly, a faith that's faithful to us. Jennifer Knapp says in one of her songs that she's cast her lots, dropped her guard, searched aimlessly for a faith to be faithful. There is no other faith more faithful that promises the Word to endure forever. A faith that will save us.

Thanks to every story in books, movies, and songs, plus our desire to bond with one another, we can get the false impression that people can save us. This is apparent in really subtle and really obvious ways. For instance, some people get into marriages thinking they can fix their spouse, that they can "save" them from whatever personal

demons they have. But that just doesn't work, whether that's learned the hard way or not. And speaking of spouses, you could also get married hoping that all your needs will then be met, your family needs, friendship needs, intimacy needs, your therapist needs, all of that would be covered by a spouse. But as any married or single person can tell you, not so. They can't save you, you can't save them. We can help other people, but we cannot save other people. We are not in the business of salvation. We are in the business of bringing the Good News, just as John the Baptist did, but even he said he is unworthy to untie the sandal of the One who DOES save. That One who saves, that person isn't us. And it's not the other people on this Zoom call, either.

But the words of scripture say that people are like grass. And the nature of grass is, it's organic. It can die. We can die. We will die. We are not meant to be here for very long, as painful as it can be to admit and accept. Again, that's not the Christmas message we want to hear, but part of being on the road to repentance involves us acknowledging our mortality.

Like I said, this can sound a little depressing but what I invite us to think about is how freeing that is. The work of salvation, the work of being ultimately faithful and steadfast, that doesn't fall on us. I don't say that in such a way that we should give up trying to be the people of God, that's not it at all. But how freeing is it to know that salvation, the coming of Christ, God with us...it's not in your hands. You can't do it. You can take a seat.

We all have our people that we are close with. We all have people who embody the love of God to us. The very tempting thing is to think that these people "save" you. Or at least, operate in this fashion, as our saviors. And there's nothing wrong with people offering us love, compassion, loyalty, and grace. But what I'm talking about is something that's a bit more steadfast, say the all encompassing and empowering love of God, fulfilling the needs in your life that only God can fill.

One of my favorite theological books is called Proverbs of Ashes by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. This book gets into redemptive violence and the search for what saves us, and it's full of soteriological land mines when it comes to redemption and the cross. If your theology is more orthodox you might find yourself hot under the collar while reading this book. The conclusion that these women come to is that it is the presence of God that saves us. God with us saves us.

We could argue that for a while, but I think it's really important that we make a connection to our Advent season with this. If this is true, Immanuel saves us. This baby that we're waiting on, Christ saves us. The very presence of Immanuel saves us. Not

our families, or dear ones, or a new government or the latest product, but the very presence of Immanuel. Our salvation is coming this Advent season in the most unexpected of ways.

And this character, John the Baptist. Locust and honey eating, fir wearing John the Baptist. He knew the one coming after him would be our salvation and that the need for repentance was paramount to make way for a faithful faith. Many of us are familiar with fire and brimstone preachers. We either have heard from them growing up, or on TV, or we see them on street corners in cities. Unfortunately that image is what a lot of people think of when they think of preachers. John the Baptist didn't do much to help this image. He wasn't fire and brimstone necessarily, but he looked a little off his rocker to those around him.

But one thing John does is prepare the way and say that someone greater than him is coming. Which takes us back to repentance. You cannot ask for repentance without an invitation. Let me say that again, and in a different way. You can't repent unless you've taken up an invitation. For John, that was making room for Jesus. And sure, we can talk about that all day, talk about the theology involved, and all these theoretical things one might do to make themselves "ready." See the "cleaning house" reference I gave at the beginning.

But we can't repent without an invitation, and we can't accept the invitation without repenting. The two go hand in hand. For a faith that's faithful, one must repent and then accept the invitation. The invitation to allow Immanuel to have his presence here among us. And about that repenting.. far be it from me to tell you what you need to repent. That's personal, and no one can tell you what that is. I know what I need to repent, and maybe in this season, you do too.

I'm only here to tell you what I see, what I see in myself, what I see around me, and what I would like to change based on the guidance of scripture. I know for myself I need a re-focus of what is faithful, and what is salvific.

I can get in the mindset that the next administration can save us, and it can help, but it cannot save. We think financial security will save us, and it can help, but even that cannot save. We think our family is all we need and of course that is wonderful but your family cannot save you. Decorating early for Christmas cannot save you. Your children cannot save you. Your close friendships, while important, cannot save you. Your spouse, while very good for you, cannot save you.

All these things are grass. They're all going to die one day. Or just not be there. Or let us down. If we get enmeshed in these things, making their very presence vital to our daily living, we are inevitably going to be let down, and we may be let down so hard that it's hard to get back up. That's what happens when you put faith in something that isn't faithful. When your faith is not based, as Isaiah says, the word of God that stands forever. Not to say that any of these previously mentioned things aren't important for our wellbeing, they just can't offer us ultimate salvation. If you put your ultimate faith in those things, you will eventually be let down. And that's what love is about, right? You love and you run the risk of getting hurt or let down. These are important lessons. This is not a lesson that we learn from God. Love that will not let us go is the lesson we learn from God. With an ever-changing world, and tumultuous times, and people and things we're just not sure about, we know that ultimate love and ultimate salvation come from Immanuel.

We have been promised salvation by God through Jesus. And God's word, spoken through Jesus, encountered in others, crying out to us from our time in nature, that truth of God's word is not going to let us down. That won't die. That's the kind of faith that's faithful.

As we make our journey through this Advent season, focus on our scripture from Isaiah. Commit it to memory, as a reminder of what is everlasting and steadfast. As a reminder of what saves and who it is who saves. As a reminder of our need for repentance, and most importantly with that, accepting that invitation. The invitation is for Immanuel, God With Us, to enter our lives and hearts in the form of a baby. A baby that comes to save us all. To preach a word that stays with us forever. A baby that invites us to a faith that's faithful. Amen.