

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"

Our readings this morning invite us to consider the role of the prophet – the herald – the messenger. Throughout the bible, prophets have played an important role by announcing to people what God was up to. Today the focus of our readings is on the message that God wanted to give to his people through the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptizer.

First, Isaiah. Some call the book of Isaiah the “fifth gospel” because it’s **Good News** about what God has decided to do, not just for his people Israel, but for the whole world. The first 39 chapters are a warning of judgment over Jerusalem’s disloyalty to God. Then, in between chapters 39 and 40, various things happened in the life of God’s people: their good king Josiah died, his heirs cause chaos among the people, Jerusalem is destroyed and the Jews are exiled to Babylon. But from Chapter 40 onwards, the message becomes one of consolation and reassurance as the prophet announces to God’s people that the end of their exile in Babylon is imminent - and from this point on, God speaks to his people with words of gentle grace: “Comfort, comfort my people... speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been complete – her sin has been paid for.”

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” “O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” And this was their Good News! Their mighty and glorious God would be with them as a nurturing Shepherd, feeding his flock, gathering the lambs and holding them close to his heart.

Mark’s Gospel passage this morning draws on the prophets Malachi and Isaiah: “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” By now, the Judeans had long returned from Babylonian exile, but with their lives ruled by the occupying force of the Roman Empire - they were in *spiritual* exile. They had not heard the voice of God through the prophets for some 500 years, between the writings of the Old Testament and the New. The people were longing to hear from God once again; they were longing for their Messiah.

Enter John the Baptizer. Imagine a rather dirty fellow, dressed in camel-hair, clutching his lunch of honey-covered locusts with bee-stung hands. No, he is not the Messiah. But Mark the gospel-writer is convinced that John is **the messenger** of which Isaiah’s prophecy speaks. In fact, all four Gospels present this image of Isaiah’s straight and smooth highway to connect God with the people.

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" There was something very attractive about John's message – people came from all over the Judean countryside and Jerusalem to hear what he had to say. And John's message was this: "After me comes the one more powerful than I. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" – the very same Holy Spirit who is described in *John's* gospel as the **Comforter**, bringing us back to the beginning of Isaiah 40: "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*"

John the Baptizer didn't want people to follow him, he wanted people to turn to God for the forgiveness of sins, and *to know that God has not forgotten them* – that their time of spiritual exile is over, with the coming of the One who is Jesus. This was Good News! And many people heard it and took action, confessing their sins and being baptized by John in the Jordan River. John's prophetic message reminds God's people to keep the faith and to prepare to meet their Messiah.

Today's the Second Sunday of Advent, it's a season of preparation and of hopeful waiting. Advent is about the expectation of God coming to be present with us. This year as we face further "shelter at home" orders, at times we might feel that **we** are in a type of 'spiritual exile' ourselves. For most of us, this season is like nothing we've seen before – we're not able to shop for presents in crowded malls (that's a blessing) – but we've also not been able to meet with friends and family in the ways that we used to. For some of us, this holiday season has been overshadowed by ill health, grief and bereavement. And for some of us this holiday season is tainted by serious financial worries.

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"

Cry out for the parents who hear their children's pleas, but cannot soothe them, because there is no money. Cry out for those whose unemployment benefits will run out at the end of this month. Cry out for those who are waiting and worrying about medical test results, and whether their insurance is enough.

We are called to be messengers of hope for the future. In the end, God's justice will prevail. In the end, God's kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven. We are called to keep the faith, as we wait for the coming of the Lord.

May the messages of Isaiah and of John the Baptizer help us prepare the way for the Lord, who longs to be invited into *every* encounter and every situation. And may we be Good News to those who need to feel God's strong and comforting arms around them. Amen.