

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 40:1-8
December 16th, 2012

Nothing was right about this guy. He didn't look right. Or, at least, he didn't look the way they thought a man of God would look – wearing the kind of cloths that Elijah and men of humility would have wore – instead of priestly, extravagant garments. Nothing was right about this guy. He didn't stand in the right place. He was in the middle of the Jordan River baptizing instead of in the Temple courts preaching. Nothing seemed right about this guy. His message was politically incorrect. He was referring to a majesty with sandals he was unfit to stoop down and untie. He talked about a Messiah who would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. The people were expecting more – a glorious “Kingly” messiah who would rule the people against their enemies. Nothing seemed right about this guy. Yet everything was right about him.

What seemed to be so wrong was so right. He didn't look the part, didn't act the part and, in fact, with camel's hair on his back and locusts for a diet, he probably didn't smell the part either. But what was right about him were his words, “*Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for him... I am not worthy... He will baptize you with so much more...*” His words were right, and the people didn't understand. The people could not take it to heart. The priests and the Levites asked him, “*Who are you?*” John replied, “*I am the voice that cries out!*” With his proclamation and baptism, John prepares the people for the long-promised Messiah.

And, if people would look beyond themselves, they would listen to a man like this. There has been many a man who comes with a message which he himself denies – but not John. There has been many a man with a very comfortable bank account who preached about not storing up treasures upon the earth; and many a man who extolled the blessings of poverty from a very comfortable home. But in the case of John, the man was the message, and because of that there were many who listened.

And if the people of God aren't going to listen to a man who stands in the middle of the Jordan River, a man with interesting cloths and a strange diet, then perhaps they will listen to a great and respected prophet like Isaiah. It's Isaiah that points toward John – who points toward Jesus. He says in the Old Testament text appointed for this day, “*A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway of our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, and the rugged places a plain...'*” Isaiah would show the people the prophet that would precede the Messiah. He called out to Jesus in the wilderness. John is the voice calling in the desert – just like Isaiah said.

Listen to what else Isaiah said in the Old Testament text for today: “*Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord. 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.*” These are words for you that are pure Gospel. They are a gift from heaven that intervenes into this depredated world – into our heartsick lives. The Lord says to you “*Comfort, comfort*”. He says it twice because God's comfort for you is urgent.

I don't have to tell you that we live in a messed up world. For some reason so many have bought into the idea that the Mayans were given insight centuries ago that the end of the world is coming up at the end of this week. We live in a messed up, misguided world where there are even Christians who are making these same kind of “end-times” predictions. I received a nine page message the other day explaining why Jesus will return before the end of the year based on what Christians have observed, dreamt about, or thought they have seen, and so on. The coming of our Lord on the Last Day will not be predicted by a person, a people, or a dream. The Lord will come

as a thief in the night – when no one will expect Him. The Word of God is clear, “*No one knows the day nor the hour of the coming of the Son of man – not even the angels in heaven know (Matthew 24:36)*”. How arrogant are these predictions? What we know is what the Bible says. That’s all we know, that all we need to know. We will let God be God – He does a pretty good job of it on His own.

Our own arrogance may not come in the form of end-times predictions, but it convinces us that we don’t need the kind of strength, the kind of life, the kind of guidance, the kind of community, the kind of support or the kind of forgiveness that is provided right here in this place. We are Christians and I know we need it, even want it, but there is too much to do... life is way to full of other things to worry about regular attendance in the Lord’s House.

Here’s what we do. Forget about blow-hard predictions that have no basis in truth and rather put your mind on what the Lord promises. Be here to receive what He promises. Invite your friends and your family to receive the double portion of what God provides – “*Comfort, comfort.*” Yes Christmas is a great time to put others in mind of the new-born King. But what about all the other times we need what the Lord gives? What about the times we need to hear that we are wrong or need to hear how we really do need to change things in our lives? What about the times the Lord desires to bring you and your loves ones around the most comforting gifts of all... His Body and Blood... His precious gift of Baptism for those who are so precious to us. This is the place our Lord serves us with His double dose of Comfort. This is the place that the Lord says we receive double from the Lord’s hand for all our sins. All of it is twice as nice – twice what we need. We say God gives us what we need. Actually, God gives you twice as much as what you will ever need.

Something might seem strange about this comfort – How God chooses to give it, what He uses in order to provide it to us. Something might seem strange about how God comforts even when we are suffering, hurting, anxious, lonely, or depressed. Is He really providing during these times? Is He with me when He seems so distant? Can He really provide life through bread, wine and water? This doesn’t seem likely. This sounds so strange. And a double portion of comfort at that??

A man who came “calling out” in the wilderness, “*Prepare the way of the Lord*” who wears and eats strange things, is not strange. 700 years prior Isaiah said it would happen. He didn’t give a date of His coming. He said He would come while “calling out” in the desert. He did. Such a strange – yet a not-so-strange thing indeed.

Here’s the double Comfort of Isaiah – John the Baptizer comes to prepare the way. And Jesus comes to fulfill all things. Our Jesus comes unto us today – right here and right now. He comes and gives us life through His life. Here’s the double comfort – The Body and blood of Jesus for you. Here’s the double comfort -- The Lord’s Supper and Holy Baptism. Here’s the double comfort – Jesus Christ our Lord who is perfect through and through loves those who are imperfect through and through. Here’s the double comfort – You are saved by what Jesus did for you on the cross and that death on the cross was for you free of charge. Christmas gifts do abound in double portions. “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*” Look in the manger. Look at the Jordan River, look at the cross, and look at the tomb. It wasn’t all just enough. It was all twice as much as you will ever need. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen