

Veni Domine Iesu

A voice cries:^[b]

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ 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.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

A voice in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord!

Now there's an advent theme for you if there ever was one! Yet sadly the message of Isaiah the prophet slips past us with very little notice – probably because we're so wrapped up in our own little worlds. But those little worlds of ours are not that all that pleasant to live in, are they? When all you have for company is me, myself, and I you live in a box lined with mirrors; and everywhere you look you see nothing but your own misery: hurt and sin and failure on every side.

If that's you today, or if that's ever been you, Isaiah is your man. God's own prophet, He was God's mouthpiece, you might say. “Thus says the LORD” was his repeated refrain whenever he spoke to God's ancient people Israel. His divinely given message was tailored precisely to their needs. They needed a word of both judgment and grace.

Judgment for their hardened impenitent hearts that were intent on doing their own will rather than God's will. God always threatens to punish all who transgress His commandments, and so we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. Israel needed a word of warning for their obstinate persistence in wickedness and idolatry – and we do too. For if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all iniquity. Therefore Isaiah was also given another word to speak: a word of grace and forgiveness. “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.”^{Is 1:18} For the LORD God has laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all. He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with His stripes we are healed.^{Is. 53:5,6}

So there is comfort here today for every discouraged, wounded soul among us. Comfort for people staggering under the impossible weight of sins committed and comfort for people hurting and aching from the persistent wounds of sins committed against them.

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,” was the message the LORD entrusted to his servant Isaiah. But this comfort is not the absence of pain or difficulty. This comfort is not being wrapped in a cozy fluffy quilt to put people at ease and remove all hurt and discomfort. No, God's comfort is found in His presence in the middle of distress. God has not promised the absence of pain and calamity, but He has promised to be with us in the midst of our darkest nights and deepest distress to strengthen and support us with His abiding love. That was the message the LORD God gave to His prophet Isaiah to proclaim in His time, and that's the message entrusted to the church in our own troubled times as well: there is comfort in these uncomfortable, foreboding days. There is a perpetual spring of hope in this winter of our discontent that seems to never end.

Today, just as in generations past, men's hearts are fainting for fear of what is coming on the world: distress of nations, hunger and famine, natural calamities. Millions flee their homelands because of the destruction of warfare. And meanwhile here at home in our land the love of most grows cold; Christians shrink to confess the

name of Christ and are embarrassed to live a godly life because they don't want to be labeled narrow-minded or bigoted.

How about you? Have you been intimidated and bullied into silence regarding your Christian faith and life? Do you find it easier and easier to simply cave and adopt the approach of your increasingly pagan neighbors? Have you begun to believe the lie that giving your sinful compulsions free reign is to be preferred to living for Christ Jesus who died for you? Have you begun to view sin as freedom when it's actually slavery?

The devil is a liar and the father of lies, you know. He wants to blind your eyes to the truth that is in Jesus. The truth is that you are not your own; you were bought with a price, so you are to glorify God also in your body. Because Christ Jesus has bought you with His body and blood, being made to be sin for you, now you are the righteousness of God in Him. Because by Holy Baptism you were buried with Him in His death and raised with Him in His resurrection, you are now in fact dead to sin and alive to God by faith in Christ Jesus. Now you are to present your own bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to Him. Now you are to yield the parts of your bodies not to impurity and uncleanness, but to righteousness and true holiness. This is the truth that is in Jesus, and it is truth for you in these desert wastelands in which we live.

Isaiah was a voice calling in the desert, and in many ways you are too. It may seem to you that all the world is against you. But not all have bowed the knee to the false gods that surround us on every side. Not everyone has turned aside from the truth and believed the lie. Not all have abandoned their first love and turned their back on the Lord who bought them with His blood. You have partners in your mission, you see.

I am here this weekend to visit Christ congregation on behalf of DOXOLOGY, the Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel. I will have a lot to say during the Bible class hour about the work that we do to strengthen pastors and laity for vital ministry in these difficult and trying times and to thank you for sharing Pastor Arnold with us, who is an invaluable part of the team of pastors who serve with me as Fellows in our DOXOLOGY Collegium.

We have a hymn that has become dear to our hearts in DOXOLOGY because it seems to capture in a nutshell the context of the church's vitally important mission in these trying times. It says in part:

O Spirit, who didst once restore thy church
That it might be again the bringer of good news to men,
Breathe on Thy cloven church once more
That in these grey and latter days there may be
Those whose song is praise
Each life a high doxology to Father, Son, and unto Thee.

This, my friends, is the mission of Christ congregation and it is your personal mission too. To lift your voice in praise and your life in service to the Holy Trinity even in these grey and latter days.

These are the times that try men's souls. Time is hastening on toward eternity, and these are indeed the grey and latter days. But you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this, and it is your joyous privilege to join your voice with others to bring God's comfort to the disconsolate in these distressing times. To make a highway for our God in these desert wastelands in which we live. To prepare the way of the Lord. As He came once in humility, laid lowly in a manger – as He will come again in majesty, robed in power and great might, so He comes among us now this very day clothed in the Word we hear and the Sacrament we eat.

This Jesus is your Jesus, beloved. He came once long ago in crib and cross that you need not fear Him at the end of time when He comes to be your judge. He was made to be sin for you that you might be made the righteousness of God in Him. This very day He wraps you in His life and love to forgive you all your sins, to ease your broken hearts and heal your wounded souls. So lift up your hearts then to greet Him as He comes. Lift up your voice to confess Him as your own, and live your life in love to serve Him who first loved you. Prepare the way of the Lord!