



GOOD SHEPHERD

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Christmas is Coming!

Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:1-6

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Christmas is Coming! You might not have felt it on Black Friday; you might have dragged your feet getting the decorations out; but we're getting close now! Christmas is coming and that's the news in today's scriptures as well.

I appreciate the service Eric put together last week. For many, the Christmas season is a struggle. And today's scripture texts don't gloss over that. In fact, that's kind of the whole point of the scriptures we heard. Isaiah 40 doesn't start with "Hey, ring those bells!" Rather, it starts with this: "Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed." (v.1)

We are going to see today that God has met us in the rough places, made a way for us, and invited us into His presence. And that news of "God with us" is the Christmas message.

I want to share the sermon in a different kind of way this morning. It's going to be more moving around and visual. (Don't worry; the pulpit will be back soon!) I want to try to illustrate Isaiah's message, then John the Baptist's message, then invite you toward Christmas.

Make Way! (Isaiah 40)

First, Isaiah. (I start walking out into the center aisle and pulling empty chairs out into the aisle.) He starts with this comforting message of God's

compassion and mercy, but then starts offering an illustration like I'm going to try to do. He goes on to describe a journey that is full of hills, rough terrain, broken roads, and more. It's a pretty vivid description of what it can feel like to try to draw near to God or to stir up holiday happiness that you just don't feel. There's all this STUFF that is life – disappointments, suffering, challenges, twists and turns. There is also all the spiritual stuff that gets between us and God – sin, disobedience, stubbornness, pride.

But into that human situation, Isaiah's message is startling. (As I read the next few sentences, I start moving the obstacles out of the center aisle, leaving an open path once again.) It is, "Make way!... God coming through!" The King is coming and all that is in the way will be cleared away: "Clear the way in the wilderness; make smooth a highway in the desert; let every valley be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley."

Now, that sounds like we are to make the way, because the King is coming. And that is part of how to understand this. We are to prepare ourselves for God. But think about those images. We can clear a rough patch or two in the road. But who can level mountains and fill valleys but God Himself? And that is going to be one of the great implications of Christmas, of the Incarnation. God Himself will make a way through to us so that we can receive Him.

And then... THEN... "the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together." (v.5)

God will make a way that we might behold Him, that we might enter into His presence.

This Way! (Matthew 3)

Years later, John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, would pick up these same words. He quoted these same verses from Isaiah and added this message to it: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (v.2)

Let me illustrate what 'repent' means with the same props as before. Remember, God has made a way through the hills and valleys, around and through the rough places. And John recalled that. But he noted that people were going their own way (or still trying to make their own way); but they were not going the way God had made. That's a sense of what 'repent' means. It means turn around and go THIS WAY! Repent doesn't mean "do better" it means, turn to God.

John was giving Isaiah's message (make way!) and pointing the way (this way!) to direct people toward God's Messiah. And that way points right to the manger, right to Immanuel, right to God with us and for us.

Christmas is not only coming; it's here! (I point at the manger at the front of the church.)

Ready and Paying Attention

So the question I want to ask – the question I think God asked through the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist: are you ready and paying attention?

When things get hectic or things get hard, when there are obstacles in your way or you feel like you are doing it all on your own... hear the Good News that God has made a way for you to Him. God has made a way for you to know Him and experience His presence. But also hear the invitation... it's THIS way... toward Jesus, toward Immanuel, toward God-with-us.

If you are like me, there's stuff that keeps getting in the way of our relationship with God. Sometimes for me, and I imagine for you, it's so significant that I have trouble seeing, hearing, or experiencing God at all. Maybe you've been on the mountaintop and God's presence is as clear as mid-day. Maybe you're in the valley and the only sign you have of the light are some shadows being cast around you. God is there. If God seems far away and life seems sad and lonely and dark, consider what obscures your

life. Where do you need to make way and make room for God? And you need not go at it alone – your church family and I are more than willing to help.

And as we each look to Christmas – whether it is a bright and happy holiday or one less shiny – hear the good and true Word of God. God’s light has dawned. God is here because Jesus brought His face near. This Christmas season we will walk and struggle together to see God’s face through Jesus Christ. So come and see – maybe you will catch a glimpse of what God has done and is doing. And if you ask me, that will be enough. Amen.