



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Advent 2 (B)

#### Comfort, Comfort

[RCL] Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

The first sentences of the Old Testament reading will be familiar to many as the opening words of Handel's masterpiece, *The Messiah*. "‘Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye my people,’ says your God!" It would be difficult to estimate the millions of people who have heard orchestras, soloists, and choirs proclaiming these words of hope and the promise of delivery from the oppression, despair, and sin of the world.

*The Messiah* has been called the most influential and widely performed oratorio of all time. Opera, as we know it, has strong roots in Italian culture, but the oratorio is a very English form of music. Oratorios are somewhat like opera in that they are dramatic works, but they are performed in concert, without costumes or staging. Most are based on Old Testament stories. One of the important aspects that sets *The Messiah* apart from other oratorios is that it focuses more on meditation than action.

The story of Handel's writing of this work is also inspiring. George Frederic Handel was born in Germany in 1685. His father wanted him to become a lawyer, but as a youth he demonstrated extraordinary musical gifts, mastering several instruments and composing in a variety of styles while still in his teens. He composed music for some of the most important patrons in Europe before settling in England. There, he became London's leading composer and director of Italian opera. He also became interested in the characteristics of English music and eventually abandoned his operatic writing to concentrate on the English oratorio.

After thirty years of popularity and prosperity, Handel found his fame fleeting and more creditors than admirers at his door. A stroke left him with partial paralysis on his left side. He had difficulty sleeping and suffered from rheumatism. He was depressed. Without another musical success, he feared his next home might be the debtor's prison.

In the midst of this dreadful summer of 1741, two critical letters arrived. The first, from the Duke of Devonshire, invited him to Dublin to produce a series of benefit concerts. Proceeds from the concerts would be for the relief of the prisoners in the several jails in the city and for the support of a hospital and an infirmary. The opportunity of a change of scene and a temporary escape from his creditors was an attractive one.

The second letter came from his friend Charles Jennens. Jennens was a somewhat eccentric English landowner who had written some lyrics for Handel in the past. This letter was a compilation of Old and New Testament passages that comprised the story of Christ's birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and future reign.

Handel shut himself in his room and completed the entire oratorio in the incredibly short time of 21 days. Part I, the prophecy and birth of the Messiah, took only seven days to complete.

The first official performance of *The Messiah* took place on April 17, 1742, and was a tremendous success. Handel conducted the work many times in the remaining years of his life, including a performance eight days before his death on April 14, 1759. During his lifetime, *The Messiah* was most often heard in the Easter season. Handel himself conducted an annual performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital in London.

Today, while the oratorio is often performed in its entirety, it is most often heard in Advent, and then frequently limited to the first section and the story of Jesus' birth. This music leaves the concert hall ringing with Isaiah's prophetic words of comfort, release, and God's glorious return to the earth.

Listen, just for a moment to a few of Isaiah's words that have become familiar to so many of us as lyrics from that oratorio:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people  
Prepare ye the way  
Every valley shall be exalted  
Then the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed  
Behold your God!

Isaiah is speaking to a captive people. Israel's Babylonian captors have been conquered themselves by Cyrus of Persia. Conquerors have a tendency to gloat over the conquered and Cyrus was no exception. In his case, however, he celebrated his victory by releasing the peoples who had been conquered by the Babylonians. So, when Isaiah spoke of comfort and the glory of the Lord being revealed, captives celebrating their release could readily imagine a return to the better days of their history when God had felt closer.

Compare this to the time of today's Gospel reading. The Book of Mark begins in a time when what is left of Israel, the kingdom of Judea, is once again a conquered people, this time ruled by the Romans. Once again, they hope for God's liberation. Isaiah's words must have been very familiar to them. Indeed, Mark quotes from Isaiah 40, verse 3, in the very reading we have just heard.

John, however, is different from the images Isaiah calls to mind. In his own time, he was something of an eccentric. In today's culture, he would have been a genuine curiosity. His wardrobe was the extreme of the

natural fibers fashion trend. Imagine how he must have looked with the roughly textured camel's hair, thrown over his body and belted with a strip of leather. His diet of locusts and wild honey surely conveyed some significant message to his culture. For us, familiar with diets ranging from high to low carbohydrates, the grapefruit diet, liquid diets, high and low protein, vegetarians of various descriptions, and a host of others, bugs and honey still sounds very strange.

If his dress and habits have a rough texture to them, listen to his message. John speaks of repentance rather than comfort. He preaches more baptism for the forgiveness of sins than God's exaltation. John is quite clear that one greater than he is coming. He is the prophet, not the fulfillment. It is the time to get ready.

This is where we find ourselves this second Sunday of Advent. The musical promise of what is to come of Handel's *Messiah* may be mostly confined to churches and concert halls, but those sounds still mingle in our minds with carols on mall loudspeakers and the virtually constant cacophony of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Santa Claus, The Grinch, White Christmas, and more.

Advent is the season of preparation. The Advent wreath's first candle has already begun to burn lower. Today we light the second. One fourth of the current year's portion of preparation time has already passed. Now, it is time to address some significant questions. What are we preparing for? Who needs to be prepared? Who will prepare them?

What we are preparing for is the easiest question. Song and text make it clear that we are preparing for no less than the kingdom of God. Think of the words we pray so often: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." That is what we prepare for and work for, today, and every day, here, and wherever we are.

Fortunately, we do not need to invest in camel's hair and leather wardrobes, or check out the Internet for a good source of locusts and wild honey. We do, however, need to be very clear about who it is who needs to be prepared and who will do the work of preparation. The answer to the first question, of who needs to be prepared, is much bigger for us than it would have been for Isaiah. Isaiah spoke to those who believed themselves to be God's chosen people. Abraham was the one whom God told that his descendants would be a witness to God's presence in the world. They grew from a tribe of nomads into a small nation of shepherders, farmers, and merchants. They may have been the main characters in the familiar stories that make up the Hebrew Scriptures, but they were very minor players in the empires that came and went in that part of the world.

In this time of the global economy, for us, the answer to who needs to be prepared is the whole world. It is everyone included in the instruction to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Now, let us consider the final question. Who will prepare the way? Isaiah and John have become the stuff of legends. The disciples are history. But we are gathered today as a community of believers. We believe

that God so loved the world that he sent his only son that we might have eternal life. We believe that all who choose to truly repent will be forgiven. We believe that nothing of this earth can separate us from the love of God.

Like John, we are not the way, but we know the way. It would seem, therefore, that we are today's prophets. We are the ones who can give voice to the good news that Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again. We know what we are getting ready for. If we do not share that, who will? You will have a few thoughts about how to do that but here are a few to get you started:

- Remember those persons who introduced you to Christ and the love of God. Remember how they did that. Was it the Bible stories they told, the example of their lives, or something else altogether? Are there places in your life where you can do similar things? Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for their work in preparing you for your place in the kingdom of God.
- Invite a friend to experience the Christ in Christmas at a church event. Special music, a social occasion, or special worship services are just a few possibilities.
- Tell a child the Christmas story.
- Be patient with salesclerks and checkout people. Wish them Merry Christmas. Tell them one of the things you most enjoy about Christmas is that it reminds you of just how much God loves each of us.
- Have a family conversation about what life in the kingdom of God is like. Think of ways we can help make our lives more like that.
- Pray for a world ruled by the Prince of Peace.
- And, if you have the opportunity, sample a foretaste of the sound of heaven by listening to a bit of *The Messiah*.

*This sermon was written for Advent 2 (B) in 2002 by the Rev. Terry Parsons.*