### “One Coming”

**Isaiah 40:1–5, 10–11**

1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out: “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 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken”. . .

10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

**Mark 1:1–8**

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” 4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In the season of Advent, we celebrate hope, peace, joy, and love, qualities that Jesus brings us. Some of those same values are found in Isaiah, who has the most famous peace passage in the Bible, the one about beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks (Isa 2:4).

Isaiah is one of the constant sources of hope, for Jews and Christians alike, although what is different about Christians is that we see many of Isaiah’s promises having been fulfilled in Christ. John the Baptizer is also seen as fulfilling one of the promises of Isaiah 40, the idea of someone in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. John did not speak very much of the “comfort” that is emphasized in the first two verses of that chapter. That was more Jesus’ *forté*. Both John and Jesus express something of the idea in the middle verses of our first passage, the notion that “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low” (40:4), which means some of the first shall be last, and the last first. Some of the lowly will be lifted up, and some of the haughty and high-status will be brought low.

John was not a preacher of comfort and assurance, but of righteousness and repentance from sin. Both John and Jesus saw Isaiah as a source of information about the Messiah. But John understood a little bit about the difference in their styles. He knew that his baptism for repentance would differ from the Messiah’s baptizing people with the Spirit.

John represented the old way of righteousness, of fear of the Lord, of strict and serious loyalty to the one God. Jesus brought a whole new way of relating to God, of intimacy, as with one’s own father. And although he affirmed John’s values, Jesus had a more relaxed and flexible approach to the pursuit of values. Goodness makes one friendly and approachable, showing kindness to the weak and vulnerable, sensitive to the needy and lonely. And truth has an effect on one’s soul; in fact, the truth will set you free (John 8:32), he said.

The pursuit of values becomes like living confidently in one’s father’s household, feeling warm and supported, knowing one can always turn to the father for help. The father was no longer a stern and proper judge, always watching and separating good from evil, always keeping an eagle eye on every believer. Now the father was a congenial and loving counselor, who could be strict, when necessary, but more often was ready to offer an understanding ear or give a word of support and encouragement.

Jesus brought the Spirit. We now think of God less in national terms, less in terms of judgment, punishment, and reward, and more in terms of love and empowerment. Jesus affirmed the power of people’s own faith. “Your faith has saved you,” he says on seven occasions in the gospels (Luke 7:50; 18:42), although translators have often chosen to translate it “your faith has made you well” (Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 8:48; 17:19). It is the same underlying Greek. The verb is *sesoken*. “Has saved you” would be the most literal translation, although the setting in healing stories has persuaded translators often to choose the expression “made you well.”

My point is that Jesus gave people partial credit for their own healing. He was always lifting people up, encouraging them to practice the faith they already had, to “hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Luke 8:15), to set their light on a lampstand (8:16), to resolve to do the will of God (John 7:17), and then to actually *do* the will of God (Mark 3:35). He believed in people and gave them strength to be confident about their faith.

He poured out the Spirit on the day he left the earth, and we now have increased potential to be receptive to spirit values. Truth is no longer just a rigid doctrine, but is a responsive relationship to spiritual reality. Goodness is not just some pre-fabricated good deed, but is our ability to respond to different people’s differing needs, and to sympathetically *hear* their stories. Beauty is not just something physical, but is the symmetry of order, of unity within diversity.

John is not to be blamed for not attaining this level of beauty and insight. He lived and died before the Spirit was poured out. He represents the old way of serious righteousness and fear of the Lord. Jesus brought the new way of joyous goodness and love of God. Although it is an alteration in moral *style*, it is not a moral weakening. The moral core of Jesus incorporates the moral firmness of John. It does so without the severe and joyless piety of the old way. Jesus’ gentleness does not make us morally weak.

So let us all found our hope for peace upon Jesus, whose way will make for peace. His affirmation of the individual person and his openness to Gentiles signals the way forward in our attempts to talk across political boundary lines. His emphasis upon the faith life and real connection with God shows the way toward freedom from any kind of fundamentalist stubbornness. He came to “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18). That means release from mental prisons of stubborn opinion, and sight to those who are spiritually blind and harboring hostility.

So go forth and embody his Spirit. Be open to the Gentiles, whoever the Gentiles may be, that is, *any* race or nationality. And think about the one who is coming, who has baptized you in the Holy Spirit.