“***Prepare the Way***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Dec. 6, 2020

**Isaiah 40:1–8, 11**

1Comfort, 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.”  
6 A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. . .  
11 The Lord will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.

**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 this season of Advent, as we anticipate the coming of Jesus, he hear words of hope and comfort, words from long before our time but still so relevant today. Do you notice how cheerful Isaiah’s message is? His words are given to people who have endured great hardship, being exiled from their homes in Judah and taken to Babylon. They have held on to their beliefs, even through personal struggles and discouragements. The prophet is urging the leaders to “Comfort my people . . . her penalty is paid . . . Every valley shall be lifted up . . . the glory of the Lord shall be revealed . . . The Lord will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.” This joyous passage is the beginning of what scholars call Second Isaiah. It has an encouraging tone, quite different from the often severe tone of First Isaiah. First Isaiah has some of the grandest messianic visions, but often, when he addresses the people directly, he scolds them.

Here the address to the people is meant to encourage and uplift them. “He will raise you up on eagles’ wings,” a wonderful hymn that we sing every week, comes from Second Isaiah (40:31). He is writing at a time when the Jewish people, living in exile in Babylon, really *need* encouragement. Now, instead of saying “you’re going to be punished,” he says “you’ve *been* punished double already.” They really need to hear that they will be taken up in the Lord’s arms like lambs are gathered in the shepherd’s arms. They need to hear that they are not forgotten, that they still have a role to play in God’s plan. From this prophet they hear words of hope and peace, that they have a prominent part in God’s work, and that they will be present when God reveals his glory. And each one of us, *too*, is a part of God’s plan and loved by God.

As we will find out in later chapters of Isaiah, God is calling them to a mission of peace and enlightenment: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6). This prophet frequently speaks of a Servant of the Lord and says that he “will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1). And again, “my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you” (54:10). Peace and comfort are paramount in Second Isaiah, and no doubt sustained the Jewish people in their period of captivity in Babylon.

This is a message for us today, too. Each of us, in our own way, has had to endure many things. We have held on to the message that Jesus gave us, that we are all part of God’s family. The God of Abraham, of Moses, and of Jesus is still the God of today, who brings us comfort, listens to our worries and troubles, and empowers us. And we find Messianic meaning throughout Isaiah, a fore-telling of the coming of Jesus.

Christians have always understood verse three here, “prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God,” as speaking about John the Baptist’s preaching and baptizing in the wilderness, and John’s role in preparing the way for the Messiah to come. John got people to think about repentance and hope, and Jesus came to answer that repentance and to meet that hope. John tells people to be prepared for the Messiah’s coming. And Jesus’ message of God’s love changed the world (as it continues to change us today).

When we look at the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark, we see that Jews in Jesus’ day looked to Isaiah for messianic hope. Mark quotes two passages that speak of preparing the way, although the sentence “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,” actually comes from Malachi 3:1, not Isaiah. Mark may be quoting from memory, and forgetting that one of those passages was located in Malachi. Or it may not matter to Mark; he names the major prophet and does not bother to identify the minor prophet. Isaiah is the most important and most renowned of the prophetic books, and comes first in the canon.

Mark’s point in our passage today is that John’s “baptism of repentance” prepared the way for Jesus, and that John knew that one greater than himself was coming after him, one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

We today can prepare the way of the Lord by making room in our hearts for his message of hope and peace. We can set aside our daily concerns and allow the words of comfort and encouragement from the Spirit to enter in to the center of our lives. It is primarily through that spiritual baptism that Jesus functions as a peacemaker. Hear the words of comfort. Those who are truly receptive to the Spirit, and show the fruits of the Spirit, are understanding and loving, even towards those who may understand the Spirit’s ministry differently. We each “see” and “hear” the part of God that we can understand, which was given to us in response to our seeking. True reception of the Spirit fills us with joy, hope, and peace, which empowers us to be comforters to others, sources of hope and peace to those around us. Our experience of the Spirit can manifest the fruits of love, and therefore enhance others’ experience of the Spirit. We can be a source of heavenly love even here on earth.

In short, where the Spirit is, there is peace, graciousness, and a hunger for truth and harmony among people. Another line from Isaiah says, “The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever” (32:17). This is living by faith, expressed even before Jesus had come. John the Baptist had faith, but he knew that the deliverer was coming after him, who would have so much more to reveal about faith and righteousness. John raised hope for the Messiah’s coming, and the Messiah put a huge emphasis on peace and love, more than John or anyone expected. But *we* know about Christ’s compassion from the gospels. He is the Son of Love and the Prince of Peace, our inspiration, our Savior, and our teacher, and he was born as a little baby. He inspires us to also be centered in love and to impart the fruits of the Spirit. Go forth and bear fruit. Let us have the peace of heaven among us today.