

# SERMON

by Rev. Emily Chapman

December 4, 2011

*(Second Sunday in Advent, Year B - 2011)*

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Lectionary Texts:** Isaiah 40:1–11; Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13; 2 Peter 3:8–15a; Mark 1:1–8

## **Isaiah 40:1–11**

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup>Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

<sup>10</sup>See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup>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.

## **2 Peter 3:8–15a**

<sup>8</sup>But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

<sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. <sup>10</sup>But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

<sup>11</sup>Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup>waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup>But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. <sup>14</sup>Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; <sup>15</sup>and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,

## **Mark 1:1–8**

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And 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. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He 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. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

I have been waiting and waiting for Advent. For most of the busy fall season, I would tell myself over and over again, “Everything will be OK when you get to Advent.” It’s my favorite season of church year. It feels a little like a breath of air.

Impatient as I often am, I am thankful for time set out to watch and wait, to remember that all my life and my work are dependent on God. I am thankful,

strangely, for the shorter days. It feels like time God might want us to rest. Even the colors in here are a more peaceful, calming blue. I love the passages from scripture that we read and today's are exceptionally good. Comfort, comfort ye my people, says your God are Isaiah's words of assurance. Second Peter says that the patience of the Lord is your salvation. As someone who must test the Lord's patience often, I find that almost as comforting as Isaiah.

All this is to say, I am annoyed with John the Baptist. I just can't figure him out, and I find him a bit of an interruption to my sense of peace. Based on what I know about him, I think I would have gone out of my way not to see him. He sounds a lot like one of those street evangelists who tell you you're going straight to hell if you don't repent right now, just the way they tell you to do it.

But there is a big difference between them and John. Whereas, they plant themselves in the middle of the sidewalk so you have to cross the street to ignore them, John goes out to the wilderness. If you want to hear what John has to say, it's going to be some trouble to get there. You need a donkey and several days worth of food and water and the ability to deal with the lonely trails through the desert.

I'd rather John not draw me out to the wilderness. But that is what John does. People are drawn to him. Most of the time I suspect, we would rather not be interrupted and certainly not with the message John is offering. John tells us of a new world...one that is built with all new materials, not just the rearranged stones of old temples and structures. And John tells us that while we wait for him to come, we don't sit back passively, but we get ready, we prepare the way, so that when he finally comes he'll be able to walk right through our open doors.

As I think about this and about John the Baptizer, I wonder if we know how to get ready for Jesus because I wonder if we know how to recognize Jesus when we see him.

Fleming Rutledge tells the story of a Christmas card she received in 1969. On the front, it had these words from John the Baptist written in red across the front: "there is one among you..."

Upon opening the card, there is a black and white photo of a young Vietnamese girl with the blank, stunned expression of a child in wartime, a child who has seen things no child should ever see.

Scrawled in red is the rest of the phrase: "...whom you do not recognize."

There is one among you, whom you do not recognize.

Was the card propaganda?

Too political?

Perhaps, but as Rutledge commented, "the Baptizer lends himself to messages of startling currency."

I wonder what our own startling currency would be. Perhaps the face on the inside of the card would be that of a homeless man at an intersection?

Or maybe an undocumented immigrant?

Maybe it would be the face of a young woman cowering in fear in the corner of a brothel in some forgotten corner of our city.

Maybe it would be the face of a young person whose body is withering away from being ravaged by AIDS.

All of these are the faces of our Lord whose coming we wait for so anxiously — the face of the Prince of Peace, the light of the World.

John's message is that Jesus would show up in the wildernesses of life, which certainly rang true when he was born in a barn to a young teenager from a town that was barely a dot on a map, only to have to flee for his life to live as an alien in a foreign land. This is a Lord who comes to transform everything, to turn everything on its end.

So will we know him when we see him?

When he comes again, if he is preceded by a prophet in the wilderness, which I suppose for us would be an urban slum, or a bedraggled isolated town, or a destroyed ecosystem, will we be too afraid to go to the wilderness?

Do we know how to see Jesus in people who don't look like us?

Do we recognize Jesus in the face of the stranger?

When we hear the good news of the Gospel, are we drawn toward it almost helplessly?

That's what happened when John the Baptist went to the wilderness to preach the good news that Christ was coming and the world as everyone knew it was about to be turned on its end. People were drawn to him not just because of what he said, but because of what he offered them – a chance to come clean, a chance to stop pretending to be someone else, to start all over by allowing him to wash them off. There were no rules for who could come and who couldn't. By going out into the wilderness, John proclaimed his freedom from civilization and its rules and regulations, and even from the rules and regulations of his religion that would not allow sinners to come into the presence of the Holy.

Instead, John called the people to WAKE UP, to turn around so they wouldn't miss the new thing God was doing right in front of them.

So I am annoyed with John because I am rather comfortable right where I am. I know where the wilderness parts of my life and my community are, and I suspect you do, too. We'd rather not get there. But John draws us out to hear the Good News not just in the Temple and in our church but out in the world.

If there were ever a time the world needed to hear the Good News of Jesus, that time is now. If we can recognize Jesus in our brothers and sisters, and if we heed Second Peter's message this morning to create communities of peace while we wait for the Lord, then one day, scripture tells us the day of the Lord will simply be upon us like a thief in the night. No more waiting and longing, but peace will be among us and in us and Isaiah's vision will be real:

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”