

Rev. Jerry Deck  
Isaiah 40:1 – 11

December 6, 2015

### Songs of Christmas

If you like, or are familiar with, Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, then it's hard to hear the words of this passage and not almost begin singing the words. For that reason this passage, or at least some of it, is fairly well known by many. Of course, what exactly it means is not always clear, especially when we don't know the context of the words. Why do people need comforting? What's this highway they're talking about? What's it mean that we're grass? Who exactly is speaking? So let's begin by trying to figure some of that out.

First, it's important to know that more than likely this passage takes place when the people of God are in exile, far from their home, as punishment for their unwillingness to follow God. But now finally, after many years, we are told that the penalty has been paid and that the Lord's forgiveness is at hand. Reconciliation, restoration and perhaps a return to their home is right around the corner. Good news to be sure.

And then we're told a voice cries out. Now this is probably not the voice of the prophet Isaiah, but the voice of someone in the heavens, perhaps an angelic messenger, who is declaring to Isaiah what is to happen. The messenger says that in the wilderness (the place of darkness and difficulty and loss), a road for the Lord is going to be made. It is a road that is flat and easy because the valleys have been lifted up and the mountains made low. It is a road, if you can believe it, with no potholes! (It's not Zionsville Road!) In all probability the reason the road was being made was not to go places, but in order to have a procession, a parade. In that time and place roads were typically built in order to have a path where royalty or a victorious commander could be celebrated. In other words, the road will be one in which the people of God return home and, even more importantly, one on which they can worship the Lord as he rides by. God's glory, which means who he is and all he has done, will be revealed and acknowledged by all.

But then things get a little confusing, primarily because of the fact that there are no quotation marks in Hebrew and so it can be difficult to know who is saying what. We have the voice from the heavens and we have Isaiah and the question is who says what when? As I've looked over it I think this is what we have going on. First, the voice is yelling out to Isaiah, "Cry out!" In other words, you've got something to prophesy. To which Isaiah says, "What shall I cry?" In other words, "What exactly shall I say?! Have you looked around? Let me give you a reality check mister angel messenger. Your people are living here in exile. Not only that but you know who we are. We're nothing but grass that withers and flowers that fade. In other words, we're vulnerable, we're in a bad place, we're without hope, and on top of that, as you know, we are fairly

fickle- faithful one moment and faithless the next. Things aren't good and you want me to say what to a people who have lost faith and hope?

And I think here it goes back to the voice from heaven who says, "Yes, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word our God will stand forever." And one of the things I love about this response is that the messenger doesn't say, "Oh, it's not that bad, or you all aren't vulnerable, or things aren't tough or you're not fickle." No, it kind of says, "Yeah, you're right Isaiah, the grass does wither and the flower does fade, but here's what you seem to have forgotten. "The word of our God will stand forever." And the word of God means more than just words on a page, it means God's actions and activity in the world. To put it another way, the angelic messenger is saying that even though, in the midst of this reality it may not seem like it, God is still at work, whether you can see it or not. "And that, Isaiah, is what you are to proclaim. So get up and let the people of God know that their God is on his way and will come with strength and power, but also with comfort, like a shepherd carrying his sheep."

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Before I say anything else about this passage I want to talk for a bit about the war on Christmas. Now when I say that I know what most of you are thinking. That I'm going to talk about Starbucks and their red cups or stores not saying, "Merry Christmas" or the legalities of putting up a nativity scene. Oh no, I'm not talking about those things. I'm talking about a war that is much bigger than that. It's a battle that many of you may never see, though perhaps have experienced it whether you know it or not. It's a battle that usually happens behind closed doors in meetings between pastors and worship directors or worship directors and choir directors or choir directors and choirs or pastors and particularly opinionated parishioners. Things are said which shouldn't be said, tears may be shed, people may leave the church and even, on occasion, folks can be fired. This is the real war on Christmas, the battle, the oftentimes unseen battle, of Christmas versus.... Advent.

Now I say that a wee bit tongue-in-cheek, though not completely. Other than a stint I spent in the Methodist church, when I was growing up we didn't really do Advent. December was just about Christmas really. And so, when I started hanging out with Presbyterians and they started talking about Advent it was all a bit weird for me. The first time I was aware of it was when I was an intern at a church in New Jersey and my boss, an associate pastor, was getting exasperated and angry because the music director would not allow the congregation to sing any Christmas songs until Christmas Eve. As you can imagine that did not go over well with many folks. Just this week I was talking to a friend of mine who was once a pastor and he was telling me how much he misses being a pastor during Advent. He quickly followed that up by saying that he didn't think the congregation members where he was pastor missed him not being there during Advent because they were never all that thrilled by how he focused much more on Advent than on Christmas during the month of December. Even this week as a worship team we had a discussion about the battle between Advent and Christmas and whether or not we should focus more on Advent or on Christmas.

Now I say it's a battle between Christmas and Advent, but that's not completely true. I mean the reality is that it isn't much of a battle at all. It's a bit like the Pacers going up against Carmel or Pike or Zionsville High. It's really not much of a competition, because no one can beat Christmas. It just has way too much going for it. Christmas has a cute little baby and animals and shepherds and songs, what great songs (like Silent Night and Away in a Manger and O Little Town of Bethlehem and Joy to the World and on and on). Christmas has amazing lights and a really cool, massive star and, of course, it has presents. You can't beat presents. Christmas is joyful and exciting and for most of us full of great memories. Advent, well, Advent has 5 candles and one song that most of us know. Advent is full of scripture about what may come off in the distant future or about the wilderness and withering grass and fading flowers. In and of itself it's just not that glamorous or exciting or fun or festive.

So then, why celebrate Advent at all? Why not, like some are apt to do, just go full-blown Christmas for all of December? All carols, all shepherds, all baby Jesus. Well, I guess because of the fact that when the focus becomes only on what happened on that particular joyous day then we are in real danger of forgetting about the sometimes difficult realities out of which this joy came. We forget that God's people were in the middle of being ruled over harshly by the Romans, that they were 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens. We forget the difficult journey, the poverty of Mary and Joseph. That this is the very situation in which Jesus was born into. When we skip over Advent we forget, as we see in our passage today, that the first glimpses of the coming messiah, occurred not when God's people were strong and in power and all was going well, but when they were afraid, lost and in exile. That the knowledge that God was not done with them, that he was at work and would continue to work, no matter the difficulties they were currently in, is what allowed them to keep hopeful, to keep going.

It seems to me that Advent helps us to see that a part of the Christmas story, of Emmanuel coming down to be God with us, is that it is not just some story that helps us escape reality for a little while (as much of Christmas seems to have become), but a story that comes to us in the midst of our reality, whatever that may be. Advent is a time, before Christmas, to remember that Jesus specializes in bringing hope and peace in difficult times, and that as he brought hope and peace to the people in exile, to Mary and Joseph, so too does he bring that hope and peace to us and will do so continually until he returns again.

And that is remarkably important for us to remember, especially in the midst of difficult times that seem to surround us right now. It is easy to either succumb to the hopelessness that is around us or to pretend as if all is well, as if we're a part of the final scene from Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Because if we are honest our words, my words, can oftentimes echo our Advent passage and Isaiah, can they not? "Look around you, God, what can we say?" We have refugees fleeing for their lives because of war. We have mass shootings in Paris and Colorado and California. We have people right here whom we know and love who are battling breast cancer, children far too young who are struggling with lymphoma. Just this week I watched as

a woman wept over the fact that her husband of many years, her best friend, no longer remembers her because of his dementia. And then a few days ago I saw for the first time a picture of one of Megan's best friends who was just visiting here this summer, but who now has a scarf over her head as the chemotherapy she's undergoing takes its toll. "What shall I cry God, in the midst of this?"

To which our angelic messenger turns to us and says, yes, times are vulnerable. That yes, this world is a mess. That yes, things will not always make sense and will be hard to understand. This is reality. But know this. It is in the midst of these sorts of things that God has always worked. Whether when in exile or being subject to Romans or when surrounded by news of death and disease and despair, Immanuel, God with us, has always been at work to give hope in those very situations.

But let me be clear that the reason why I think it is important that we not forget or whiz by Advent is not because I like candles or dislike Christmas songs, by no means (and yes we'll still sing some Christmas songs during Advent!). No, the reason Advent is important is because I'm convinced that an Advent people are the ones that God can most use. God doesn't need people who have given up in despair or have chosen to escape reality and act like all is fine, God needs a people who are honest about the situations in which they're in and that surround them and yet will not give up or lose hope because we're convinced that God is there in the midst of those problems.

An advent people are the kind of people who say yes, this refugee crisis is horrible and difficult and complex, but rather than just being overwhelmed and giving up or turning off the news so that we don't have to think about it, an advent people will say that while we can't solve the whole issue we can certainly do our part, whatever that looks like, knowing that somehow God is at work in the midst of this. A people who are determined to continue to sing O Come, O come Emmanuel.

An advent people are a people who come alongside those who are battling cancer or other disease and are willing to cry with those who suffer and to mourn with them, to wonder why this happened with them, but then who help them to fight, who make meals for them, who pray for them, who encourage and support and stay by their side no matter how hopeless things may seem. A people who are determined to continue to sing O come, O come Emmanuel.

An advent people are those that know there is evil, but refuse to hide from it. A people who know we are human and can only do so much and yet trust that God is powerful and can do all. An advent people are those who, because they have seen God work in the worst of places in the past, have the faith to believe that Emmanuel, God with us, will continue to do so in the present and the future. May we be an advent people and may we, by the hope we have, the lives we lead and the work we do, live out that beautifully honest and hopeful song:

O Come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel,

That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Amen.