

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday of Advent, Year B

First Reading

Isaiah 40:1–11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
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.  
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All flesh is grass,  
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades  
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;  
surely the people are grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Go on up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good news;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;  
lift it up, fear not;  
say to the cities of Judah,

“Behold your God!”  
Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young. (ESV)

## Second Reading

2 Peter 3:8–15a (verse 15 finished in italics)

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, *just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,* (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,

who will prepare your way,  
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And j and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

In our text from Isaiah this week God cries out to someone, “Comfort! Comfort my people!” It is beyond dispute that the “people” who require comforting are the Israelites who have been exiled to Babylon, but who is He talking to? Who is/are to go to do the comforting? That’s a question that has plagued interpreters of this famous passage for a long time. For a good while the tendency has been to say that God is addressing the heavenly council, in the way that He does in chapter 6, or in 1 Kings 22, or Job, 1-2. God is speaking to the court of heavenly beings and telling them to go and comfort His people. I’ve read it that way in the past, but a paper I came across this week changed my mind.

For one thing, the scene lacks the back-and-forth conversation between God and the council that other such scenes share. But the greater objection lies in reading the text against its context, understanding the situation for which this oracle was given.

This shift, from hearing God speak to the heavenly court to someone else (I’ll get to that in a bit) required that I also change my understanding of the people for whom God intends the “comfort.” I had long understood the ones to be comforted to be Israelites in exile *who continued to long to return*. But reading this against the larger thrust of chapters 40-48, I now think that the ones who are to be “comforted” are those who, after 3 generations in captivity, have come to question God’s power and will for them, and who have accommodated themselves to life in Babylon.

In the Lectionary for Christ the King just a couple of weeks ago we encountered Ezekiel, whose prophecies helped the people in exile to continue to live faithfully as a people while so far from their homeland. It doesn't seem a difficult step to go from there to abandoning their hope of return. With the rise of Cyrus of Persia, the real possibility of return beckons. But what if the people no longer wanted to? What if the absence of a Temple and the razing of the capital city had so discouraged them that they lacked the will to go home?

This is the enticing possibility that I found in one of the papers I read this week. (I'll give the link below.) The larger focus of chapters 40-48 then makes sense. God asserts His singularity throughout, needing no outward symbols of His greatness like a temple because He alone governs the happenings on earth, knows the future. He is not one among the other Gods His people encounter in Babylon, He is the *only* God, and He intends to lead His people home. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple are not marks of His weakness but simply His intentions, to chasten His people.

That time of chastening has ended. It is time to renew faith in your God and pick up stakes and go *back* to your homeland. This is how I hear these words from Isaiah 40 now. And I hear them addressed to the leadership in Babylon, not to some heavenly council. Isaiah speaks directly to those whose responsibility it is to lift up the people and get them moving. "Comfort! Comfort ye my people!"

This shift in my understanding of the hearts and attitudes into which this prophecy was given speak loudly to me in the current day. It says to me and to other leaders, "Rouse the people from their torpor, their accommodation to things as they are. Lift their eyes to the future that I offer and get them moving!" I can see in myself a tendency to want to accept that things will never be a lot better than they are now, to try to learn to live with what my limited vision of the future holds. I "make the best" of things rather than set out on the road that God makes plain before me. As a leader, I find myself trying to help others do the same, live reasonably successfully within the confines of our own vision.

And God says, "Rouse yourself," and opens up His vision to me, to us, and calls us to step out onto a road paved over mountains and valleys that seemed impassible. The forces of this world that seem too big for me are nothing to Him. The kings, the powers and principalities all bow their knee to His good will for me, and even for them. I am not just comforted in my place of quiet despair, but called forward into a new adventure, and told to speak comfort to others who've also given up hope and lead them forward with God leading the way with His mighty arm. My "temple" may be missing, but God didn't ever really need that thing I used to lean on. A glorious future awaits and I am called to step into it while drawing others in along the way.

(Here's the [LINK](#) I promised to the paper I referenced above.)

## Second Reading

As with Paul's letters, it helps us interpret other epistles if we can set them in a context. Can we identify the author? The intended audience? The situation that caused the letter to be written? These questions are often less difficult with Paul's than these later, "epistles general," but there are some things we can deduce.

First, as regards authorship, there have been questions since the earliest years of the church about whether or not it was written by Peter. Origen noted these questions, though he accepted Petrine authorship. Jerome noted how differently it was written from 1 Peter, but explained away the differences by suggesting that Peter used two different secretaries to write the two letters for him. It is well accepted that the phenomenon of *pseudepigrapha*, that is, letters written in another's name, was common if not frequent in the early years of the church. Because of the rather drastic differences in vocabulary and style between 1 and 2 Peter, I lean toward including 2 Peter among the *pseudepigrapha*.

I would like to be clear, though. I do not in any way mean to suggest that this somehow reduces its importance or say that this letter isn't really Scripture. Because I believe also in the inspiration of the process that produced the canon, its inclusion means (to me) that God intends it for my edification just as 1 Peter is also intended.

The intended audience for 2 Peter is too nonspecific to be determined. No author I've found has even bothered to try to locate a congregation or a city for whom it was written. But we can with some confidence identify the issues that caused the letter to be written.

There was, both in Greco-Roman and Jewish circles in the first century, a line of argument that denied any future beyond this life, and therefore no need to govern one's behavior as though there might be some future judgment. The Epicureans were the strongest advocates for this point of view among the philosophers and the Sadducees among the Jewish thinkers. While neither of these camps argued that this lack of judgment gave reason for unrestrained licentiousness, they nonetheless rejected any future existence or judgment as a reason for moral behavior.

Knowing this background it isn't difficult to see how this letter might have been intended to address both the arguments against a future return of Jesus and any call to moral behavior because of it. Our passage, read in the context of the season of Advent where we look back to Jesus' first appearance and also ahead to His second, presses us to regard Jesus' return as a strong reason for moral behavior.

So the overarching purpose of the letter is to encourage moral behavior because of the certainty of Jesus' return (though its delay appears to be a cause for concern).

“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, *what sort of people ought you to be* in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!”

In other words, “Jesus is coming, even if He hasn't come when you expected Him, so you'd better behave!” I'm sorry, but that sounds too much like “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” “You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry! You'd better watch out, I'm telling you why! Santa Claus is coming to town!” Somehow, I think that Peter, or the pseudonymous author of the letter, whoever, had something less mundane in mind. Don't misunderstand me. I think that many in the church have interpreted it precisely this way because their primary concern was to control behavior. I just don't think that's how someone inspired by God in the decades immediately after Jesus' sojourn with us on earth would have meant it.

“If that's not how the author meant it, then why did he write it that way?” Good question. He (for it was almost certainly a man at this point) didn't. So much of it depends on the translation of one little word, *dei*, in the text. Our translators have given us “ought” to translate it. I can't blame this translation on the conservative bias of our ESV translators this time. Almost all the translations have something similar. But that doesn't mean that we should go with a word like “ought” that imposes obligation that is contrary to the Gospel.

You see, “*deo*” the root of *dei*, doesn't mean ought to, or should. It means compelled, bound, necessary as in unavoidable. “Ought” suggests that there is some decision to be made. “Will I do what I ought, or not?” “Deo” says that, because this is true, then that will necessarily, unavoidably follow.

So, to try (rather awkwardly I'll admit) to translate 3:11 another way, I'd say, “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people must you inevitably be in lives of holiness and godliness...” In other words, when we walk in the unshakable hope that Jesus will return and one day restore all things, even the heavens and the earth, we can't help but walk in holiness and righteousness.”

Don't go chasing after holiness and godliness, meditate on the hope that is yours and those things will *necessarily* follow! This is the theme of 2 Peter, and so also of the season of Advent.

## Gospel Text

Have you ever regretted that you can't cite chapter and verse of the Bible? You know this thing you want to quote, a certain verse, but you're reluctant because you can't quite remember exactly where it's written? Welcome to Mark's world. "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet..." Then he goes on to quote Malachi, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way..." (He does quote Isaiah in the next line, at least.)

I love Mark. I don't know if it's my "favorite" Gospel, I'd have a hard time picking a favorite, but something about this Gospel gets my blood going. So I'm not being critical here, except perhaps to criticize the idea that quoting chapter and verse is important. In Jesus' day it was enough to say, "It is written." And in Mark's day it was okay to get the citation wrong.

Mark doesn't waste any time with birth narratives or expounding on the mysteries of pre-existence of the Word. No. He dives right into the deep end of the Jordan with John the Baptist and his proclamation of the mighty One who will come after him. This tone of anticipation must be the reason that this text is used as our Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent. In this season, wherein our eyes are cast forward to Jesus' return, this hope for the One that John announced is powerful.

And yet, I would suggest that the One whom John expected and the One who actually came to him for baptism are not the same. Mark certainly didn't think so. Mark's Gospel is entirely encapsulated between two very different proclamations of Jesus, and the way the evangelist tells the story seems to focus entirely on the question, "Which version of the Messiah will you choose? The Davidic warrior king that John proclaimed, or the crucified and risen Savior proclaimed by the young man in the tomb?"

John knew that Jesus was the Messiah, but he misunderstood the nature of Jesus' messiahship, at least according to Mark. I think that at the time Mark wrote his Gospel, there were still questions about Jesus because He didn't conform to the image that John and most of the people of Judah were expecting. This is why Mark is careful to tell us that "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him" (John) and contrasts that with the initial reaction to the young man's proclamation, "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:8, keeping in mind that 16:8 is the last verse of the oldest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel. Verses after that were added later.)

John's proclamation confronts us with the same question today. "As you look forward to Jesus' return, do you look for the popular image of a Savior who will come and set everything right by force, or a Savior who suffers violence to put an end to our need for it?" I will write a whole lot more on this central question of Mark's Gospel as Year B proceeds, but this week's text brings it front and center right from the start.