

Trinity United Methodist Church

December 6, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. **2** Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. **3** A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. **4** Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. **5** And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will 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 like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. **7** The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. **8** The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." **9** You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" **10** See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. **11** He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

At some point in the last year or so, my family made me sign up for an app on my phone called Life360. Some of y'all know what Life360 is; it's a tracking app that, at first, I was like, "You want me to put *what* on my phone? I'm a grown man. I don't need that." It's a tracking app where you can see other members of your family and where they're located, where they are at any point in time. You can even make your own "circle," so that's what kind of got it started, was Chloe and her friends made their own circle so

they could see where each other was at any given moment, and that's worked about as well as you can imagine for teenage girls. ("You're *where* without me right now?")

But for all my groans about such technology, it has been helpful, I will admit. It's been helpful especially with my wife and I to know when either of us might be on the way back home to each other. For instance, if I know that she is out shopping, and particularly if she is at a thrift store like Goodwill, where time stops for her and she loses all track of time, I'm able to see that she is still there over in Hampton and send her a text message and say, "Hey, just a friendly reminder, we need you home by such-and-such a time for the next family activity." Or, it's also helpful for me, when I check it and go, "Oh shoot! She's actually on the way home. Let me get cracking on that honey-do list that she left for me that I've put off until the last minute."

Occasionally we'll still figure out whether the other is on the way home the old-fashioned way: We'll actually text each other or call each other. "Hey, where are you at?" Or we'll call when either is on the way home and ask if we can pick up anything on the way.

You know, modern technology is so helpful to know when someone will be arriving to your home. We recently bought a new couch for the living room, and Rooms2Go texted me a link the morning that it was to be delivered, where I could click the link and track the delivery truck. No more of this "8 a.m. to 5 p.m., we'll be there *sometime* today" window. I was able to see that we were number three on the route and to see precisely when they would arrive.

In fact, I've come to miss, sometimes, this technology when I wonder where others are, like my parents, who don't have the app. They'll call or text when they're on their way from their house in Prince George County to ours. And Mom will usually send a text saying who is driving, her or Dad. If it's Mom, they'll be here sooner than later. If it's Dad, well, it depends.

But wouldn't it be great if there was an app where we could see just how far away God might be from us at any given moment? Now, let's face it. We all know the biblical and church answers that through the Holy Spirit, God is always with us, even dwelling in us. But also let's face it, it doesn't always feel like that, does it? If only we could pull up an app in our moments of greatest need and see just how far away God might be from us. Is God on the way? Or has God gotten busy somewhere else?

In Isaiah's time, the Holy Spirit had not descended on everyone yet. So God was still very much there (holds hand at high level), and God's people were still very much here (holds hand at low level). And there was this big gap in between that had been caused by sin. So God had given the law, sacrifices and ways of living that were different from all of the other cultures around them, the law that would help to close that

gap between God and God's people. But still, God was very much up there and the people were very much down here. And for a while the people would keep up in faith, that following the law was closing that gap. But they were never quite for sure about that, and so they would grow tired of trying. They would grow tired of waiting to see if God would draw closer to them. And so they would lose faith. They started turning to lesser gods, gods of the surrounding culture.

And so then God sent prophets like Isaiah to warn the people and say, "Hey, turn back to the law. Keep working at closing that gap between yourselves and God." Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other prophets spoke of themes of judgment, like we reviewed last week. That yet even in judgment there is hope, because God is closer than we might otherwise think. God, indeed, is not as far away as it might seem.

But these warnings didn't work, so God gave them over to their lesser gods and the gods of other countries who couldn't protect them. And they were sent into exile, into darkness. For 50 years they lived in exile, and when Jerusalem was conquered, God's house, the temple where God was thought to live, was completely destroyed, and they were left in this big theological quandary. If God's house is clearly destroyed, then where is God now? They didn't have an app to figure out where he was. They couldn't text him. Where indeed was God? It's a dark and painful place to be.

But then hope began to emerge. And remember, hope begins in the darkness. Some of them were allowed to return to Jerusalem, to begin rebuilding the temple, to begin rebuilding Jerusalem, but it was still no easy task. It was long, slow, hard, arduous work, such that other nations would come by and mock them and jeer at them and ask them, "Why are you even bothering to rebuild, because you know all we're going to do is keep picking on you and keep destroying you?"

What's going on in your life, in our lives, that's long, slow, arduous work? To the point where you might have even asked yourself, "Why am I even bothering?" Maybe it's working through grief. Maybe it's letting go of a grudge, letting go of pride, or even the hard work of recovery. If only we could check that app, right? If only we could get a text from God that says, "Hang in there! I'm close. I'm on the way."

Well, friends, that's pretty much what our reading from Isaiah is today. Where God says, "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double from all her sins. A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.'"

Rejoice, friends! The Lord is on His way home to us. There's just one catch. In the ancient times, this is exactly how kings and generals and dignitaries would announce that they were coming to your city, to your town. But it was like instead of Mom texting

me, “Just left the house. I’m driving. See you soon,” it was more like Mom texting me, “Just left the house. Dad’s driving. See you when we see you.”

You see, they didn’t have planes and trains and automobiles in biblical times. Travel was extremely cumbersome and slow, not to mention the entourage that these people would have with them, and often armies marching ahead of them as well. And furthermore, they didn’t have VDOT, as inept as VDOT can be. They didn’t have an agency to fill in the potholes and so forth. The townspeople themselves would have to go outside the city walls and clear the road and fill in the ruts and make the paths straight. A way in the wilderness for those who they were expecting.

And then after all of the preparations, they waited. And they waited. And they waited some more. Sometimes this was months or even years. Such that the people would begin to wonder, “Are they really coming? Or are they not?” There’s no app to see where they were. And so, in the waiting, they would lose focus. They would drift off. They would let the preparations fall apart, maybe. They wouldn’t maintain the road; they’d let it fall into disrepair again.

That’s why Isaiah says that “all people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

You see, we’re a people who don’t like to wait. And it’s gotten even worse in the 21st century. Next time you’re waiting somewhere, pay attention to what you’re doing. Pay attention to what everyone else around you is doing. I can bet you 99% of you and the people around you will be doing this (looking at phone/tablet). We don’t like to wait. We don’t like silence. We don’t like “not being in the know.” We don’t like to wait. And in the waiting, therefore, we lose focus, too. We lose patience. We let preparations fall into disrepair in our hearts.

But yet waiting is part of our calling as Advent people. Waiting is what we do as Christians, as we wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to return in the clouds with glory. That’s part of our calling is to wait, but not only to wait passively; but as Advent people to proclaim in the waiting, as Isaiah instructs. “Oh Zion, messenger of good news, shout from the mountaintops”—*Go, tell it on the mountain*, we love to sing. “Shout it louder, oh Jerusalem! Shout, and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah,” and Smithfield, and Carrollton, and Windsor, and beyond—“your God is coming! Yes, the sovereign Lord is coming in power. He will rule with a powerful arm. See, he brings his reward with him as he comes. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.”

And so our waiting is not just passively sitting on our couches waiting for God to arrive, but to actively wait as we keep the faith that yes, Christ our Lord is coming. Christ our Lord is here, and Christ our Lord will come again.

When Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary to China, first went to China, it was on a sailing vessel. And very close to the shore of islands where cannibals were known to live, the ship was becalmed. The wind went completely dead. And so they were at the mercy of the current, which was pulling them ever so slowly toward the shores of the islands. There they could see the savages waiting and eagerly anticipating a feast.

So the captain of the ship came to Mr. Taylor and sought him to pray for help to the Lord. "I will," said Taylor, "but only if you set the sails to catch the breeze." The captain responded, saying he would not make himself a laughingstock raising the sails in a dead calm. And Taylor said, "Then I will not pray for the ship, unless you prepare the sails." And so it was done. And while he was praying, there was a knock at Taylor's door, and the captain asked, "Are you still praying for wind?" Taylor affirmed that he was, and the captain said, "Well, you'd better stop praying, because now we've got more wind than we know what to do with."

That's Advent. It may feel like the wind is completely out of our sails. It may feel like we're drifting nowhere. It may feel like we're waiting in vain. But friends, Advent is about raising the sails so that as we pray for the wind of the Spirit to blow afresh, we might catch that wind, the wind of God, and sail confidently into the future that God has for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.