

## **“Dream the World Better”**

### **Isaiah 40:1-11**

I have an Advent dream. I dream of a world without Rona, without social distancing, and without face masks. I dream of a world in which our churches can be fully open and we can be back in our Sunday School rooms, and back to adult Bible study.

I have been teaching Wednesday night confirmation classes in our fellowship hall. We have 16 students, 11 eighth graders and 5 seventh graders. They sit in chairs 6 feet apart with no tables and wearing masks until we closed through December 17.

I have a difficult time hearing what they are reading or saying through the masks. My voice feels muffled through my mask.

They have to write on their laps with no tables. I have to stand for the hour and walk around so I can hear them. As I've gotten strength in my legs back, that's become easier.

As we make our way through the end of 2020, I find myself dreaming the world better.

The prophet Isaiah had a similar desire but a different approach. In the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of his book, Isaiah had a vision or dream in which he saw the Lord God in heaven, speaking to a group of supernatural beings. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

The prophet shared his vision after delivering 39 chapters of warnings to Israel. Isaiah had told the people to seek justice and put their faith in God, but they had been rebellious. As a result, he predicted that all the treasures of the king “shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord” (39:6). Sure enough, the nation was conquered by Babylon, and the people were carried off into exile.

But this period of defeat and loss was not the end of the story. Isaiah dreamed the world better by sharing his vision of God's heavenly words. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," God said to the supernatural beings all around, "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" (40:2). God was saying that the people of Israel had paid a great price for their sins of injustice and unfaithfulness. Their time of punishment was now over, and nothing more would be required of them.

When God forgives, the slate is wiped clean. For them, and for us.

Then a voice cried out in the heavenly council: "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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (vv. 3-5).

A great desert wilderness stood between Babylon and Jerusalem, and this voice called for the creation of a highway for God, one in which the people could travel home. This way in the desert is God's way. "This way is the way of restoration, and it belongs to God."

The way of restoration is the highway created for God's people. Defeat was being replaced by victory, sin by forgiveness, and loss by restoration. Years later, Luke spoke of the word of God coming to John the Baptist in the wilderness: "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"' (Luke 3:3-4).

Baptism of repentance. Forgiveness of sins. The way of John is also the way of restoration, and it belongs to God. John dared to dream the world better.

So where do we need restoration today? The apostle Paul looked forward to the day when all creation “will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21), and we know what he is talking about. We look around and see the fouling of air, land, and water. We look at our relationships and see brokenness between friends, colleagues, spouses, and family members. We look inside ourselves and see the decay of our morals and our aspirations. We know we need restoration in so many areas of life: Ecological, relational, ethical and spiritual. Each of us needs the message of hope that Isaiah and Luke delivered with the words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

So many crooked things need to be straightened out, and we know that we cannot do it alone. In Isaiah’s vision, a voice says, “Cry out!” And Isaiah said, “What shall I cry?” The message: “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:6-8). Isaiah knows that we humans are like grass that withers away, but the word of our God is rock-solid and eternal. When we open ourselves to the power of God’s word, when we let it touch us and transform us, we are straightened out and restored.

Remember that on the first day of creation, God made the powerful light that is absolutely essential for life, using only the words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). God saw that the light was good, and then God separated the light from the darkness.

God used a set of words to bring order out of chaos — creative speech that God has continued to offer through all of history.

God has continued to speak through the words of prophets such as Isaiah, through the proclamation of messengers such as John the Baptist, and most powerfully through the teachings of Jesus, the Word of God in human form (John 1:14). In the chaos of 21<sup>st</sup>-century crookedness and decay, we need these divine words more than ever.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech during the 1963 March on Washington, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, “We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” The crowd responded to the emotion of the prophet Amos, and biographer Taylor Branch reports that King could not bring himself to deliver the next line of his prepared speech.

Some of the people on the platform urged him on, and the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson called out as though she were in church, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin.” Branch says that King began to preach, and his words “went beyond the limitations of language and culture.” His “Dream” message took him from Amos to Isaiah, and he ended with the words, “I have a dream that one day, every valley shall be exalted.”

Yes, words create reality. The words of Isaiah dreamed the world better, and then Jesus Christ made those words real. Jesus is, for us, the Word of God made flesh, and we can be thankful that “the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8). Jesus forgives our sins, wipes our slates clean, straightens us out, and gives us hope for the future.

All we have to do is receive him, believe in him, and walk behind him.

Jesus is the one that Isaiah was talking about when he said, “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!’” (Isaiah 40:9).

Jesus is Isaiah’s dream come true, the one who fulfills the prophecy: “See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. ... 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” (Isaiah 40:10-11). That’s Jesus, the one who possesses God’s might but also feeds his flock like a shepherd. He is the One who has the power to straighten us out, but also the grace and love to restore us.

When the birth of Jesus is celebrated again this Christmas, remember the words of Isaiah: “Here is your God!” Jesus joins Isaiah in bringing you back from exile, wherever you may be wandering in a far-off land. Jesus does the work of restoration, forgiving you and giving you new life. He makes the rough places smooth and the crooked ways straight.

Isaiah dreams the world better, and Jesus brings those dreams to life through each of us.

One such dream happened here last night as people were dropping off Christmas gifts for the children at Redeemer. One SUV pulled up filled with gifts with a beautiful young woman driving. As she stepped out, I went to greet her with a calendar, a devotional, and bread and wine. Even though our faces were covered with masks, we recognized one another’s eyes at the same time. We each took a step forward and stopped knowing we couldn’t greet one another in the usual way. I hadn’t seen her since last spring before I went into the hospital. I remembered holding her in one arm the day she was baptized, almost 18 years ago. She has grown up and I believe Mackenzie will dream the world better.

So will Matt Smith who just passed his Ohio bar exam and who turns 26 today. Matt will dream the world better.

May the peace of God . . .

#255 – There's a Voice in the Wilderness