

Advent Carol Service 2017: A Time for Shouting

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Preacher: Dr. Bruce Hindmarsh

- [0 : 00] We have heard some magnificent voices this evening. A few years ago, the CBC radio program The Current was introduced every day by an anonymous figure with a deep baritone, and he became known simply as The Voice.
- He would intone the themes for the day's broadcast with a slightly ironic, over-exaggerated sense of drama. He was The Voice, and he retired in 2012. I'm not sure who he was.
- One of our lessons this afternoon from the prophet Isaiah chapter 40 is all about a voice. You can follow this on page 599 in the Old Testament section of your pew Bible if you'd like to follow along.
- We don't know who the voice is that speaks tenderly to Jerusalem, that calls out in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord, and then that cries, all flesh is grass, and then that shouts, behold your God.
- We don't know who the speaker is. We just hear a voice, offstage as it were, a voice that calls, a voice that cries, a voice that shouts.
- [1 : 14] We don't know who the speaker is, that is, until we read the Gospels. There we find Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all four of our Gospel writers, tell us that the voice is John the Baptist.
- We heard this in our reading just now from the Gospel of Matthew. This is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is asked explicitly, who are you? Are you the Messiah? Nope.
- Are you Elijah? Nope. Then are you the prophet? Nope. Well, exactly who are you? John the Baptist says, I am the voice.
- So the enigma of Isaiah 40 is solved. The mysterious voice that speaks tenderly to Jerusalem, that calls, that cries, that shouts good news.
- The voice is John the Baptist. Now think about it. If there's only a voice, then you and I are not spectators. We don't just stare. If there's only a voice, what you do is you listen.
- [2 : 22] So for just a few minutes this afternoon on this first Sunday of Advent, Happy New Year, first day of the church year, as we begin to look forward to Christmas, let us listen to the voice of Isaiah 40, knowing that this voice is John the Baptist.
- The good news is that as you strain to listen to this voice, the first thing you hear is that it's a comforting voice. It's a reassuring voice. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
- Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. I can't read those words without hearing in my head the music of Handel's great oratorio of the Messiah, where the first 10 minutes or so after the overture are from this opening section of Isaiah, Isaiah 40, beginning with comfort ye, comfort ye my people.
- Sometimes in the Bible, the word comfort has the Old English sense of strengthen. But here it really is a voice of consolation, a message of comfort in the sense of consolation.

Are you in need of reassurance and consolation in your life today? Even if this is not a time of acute suffering in your own life, most of us experience, sooner or later, in one way or another, that the world is not what it was meant to be.

[3 : 38] Through evil, through sin, through weakness, through hardship, we find that we are people that need comfort from beyond ourselves. Well, the good news is that you can find this comfort by listening and obeying to three words that this voice calls out to us in Advent.

Prepare, cry, and see. The first word the voice calls out is prepare. Verse 3, a voice cries, In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The voice is asking for a construction project, a major road construction project. Bring in the bulldozers and make a clearing. Every valley shall be lifted up. Every mountain and hill made low.

The uneven ground shall become level. I grew up on the Canadian prairies, and these verses sound a lot to me like where I grew up, a place where you can see for miles.

These verses are, in fact, speaking of a massive operation to clear a path and to allow everyone to see what's coming. What's coming? The glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together.

[4 : 50] This was John the Baptist's message. He was this voice because he knew that the glory of the Lord was about to be revealed. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory.

The glory of the one and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth. Or think of the shepherds. And the glory of the Lord shone around them. This is comforting.

You and I were made to look on this glory, to live in this radiance, to see the beauty of the Lord. This is what we've been looking for all our lives. But the voice says, prepare.

Get ready. Clear away any obstacles. So the voice says to you and me at the beginning of this Advent season that we need to prepare for the coming of Christ. What is there in your life that needs to be cleared out of the way so that you will be able to see the glory of God in Christ?

How can you prepare room in your heart to receive the Christ child? What rubbish needs to be cleaned out? What's the biggest obstacle in your life right now that stands in the way of you seeing the glory of God in Jesus Christ?

[5 : 59] What can you do by the help of the Holy Spirit in these weeks of Advent to clear this obstacle out of the way so that you can see Jesus? The voice says, prepare.

The voice also says, cry. Verse 6. The voice cries that all flesh is grass. Life is mortal. Life is frail.

The beauty we experience fades. Like petals fall from a flower. Like green grass churns brown in the heat of summer. And so cry. Cry.

Cry that our lives are so short. That the beauty we experience is so transient. Remember in Advent that we are mortal. Gerard Manley Hopkins captured this feeling in a poem to a young child who was sad when watching the leaves falling in autumn.

Margaret, are you grieving over golden grove, unleaving the leaves falling? Leaves like the things of man, you with your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

[6 : 59] And he concludes the poem, comes full circle. It is the blight man was born for. It is Margaret you mourn for. We are mortal. There is an ache in the human heart, knowing our mortality, while we have such restless desires for eternity.

This confession of human transience in Isaiah is honest, but is it comforting? But the voice isn't finished crying. It finishes this lament by crying, But the word of our God shall stand forever.

We might fail and fall, but God's word will never fail. Our lives are transient, but God's word is eternal. We are perishable, but God's word is imperishable. And this is comforting.

You and I were made to be sustained by God's living and enduring word. The creative word that spoke the universe into being can sustain us in our weakness.

God can take up our transient lives into his eternal life, and nothing of beauty will be lost. God's enduring word can sustain us in our frailty.

[8 : 06] There is something here deeper than deep. And this is the word, Apostle Peter says, the apostle says that was preached to you. It is by this word that you were born again, he says, by this word that you were given an immortal life.

So again, this is a comforting voice after all. This Advent season, you can face your mortality. You can face the human condition in all honesty, can cry about it.

But you can also cry with faith in God's sustaining word. He makes amends for all. His word never fails. Finally, this is a voice not only that says prepare, it's a voice that not only says cry, it's a voice that also says see, look, behold.

Verse 9, say to the cities of Judah, behold your God, see, the Lord God comes with might. This is a prophecy that God will appear as a strong and mighty deliverer, a savior.

And this is finally what the word Advent means. Advent just means coming or appearance or showing up or arriving. It means it's here at last.

[9 : 16] And as Israel mourned in exile, the voice in Isaiah said, see, look, God himself will come to you as a mighty savior to rescue you.

And John the Baptist said, sure enough, I am the voice and Jesus is that mighty savior. When he saw Jesus, John also said, look, see, behold, the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, the kingdom of God has arrived.

In Jesus, God has shown up in person to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. And so in Isaiah, Isaiah says, this is good news, mighty good news.

Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength. It's time for this voice now to be shouting. Advent is a time for shouting.

And what do you shout? You shout, look, behold, really see. So finally, after all the preparation, we are invited just to look and see and gaze upon Jesus Christ, the glory of God revealed.

[10 : 24] To be wrapped in wonder, love and praise, God has appeared on our behalf as a mighty savior. And this is what you and I need more than anything else. And so this is a word of comfort par excellence.

God is here. Emmanuel, he is with us. And of course, he is still here, as by the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ himself continues to come to us in word and sacrament and to make his dwelling among us.

He came into Mary's womb, but he is also, as St. Paul says, formed in each one of us by the Holy Spirit. The prophecy began with the words, comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to them.

And it ends with the most gentle picture of all, of the kind of mighty, powerful savior it is who appears. Just think, the mighty savior who will deliver Israel once and for all from exile, this powerful God who comes with might.

And then you turn and look at him, and it says, he is a shepherd who will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom. He gently leads those that are with young.

[11 : 32] He has an especial care for the most vulnerable in the flock. As Jesus himself said, I am the good shepherd, and I lay down my life for the sheep.

John the Baptist might be the voice, but I am the shepherd, the good shepherd. We need to hear these words of comfort this Advent season in our own lives and families. We need to hear these words of comfort as a church community.

Christ Jesus remains the good shepherd who will care for his flock, for the lambs and those who lead them, for the people and the clergy, for parents and children. So friends, a solitary voice speaks out of the silence of the desert, and it says to us again today, prepare, clear space to see the glory of God.

The voice says, cry, cry all your tears, every one of them, because the word of God will yet sustain you. And the voice says, see, look, hear now, your God has come to you in Jesus Christ.

Let us comfort ourselves with these words this Advent season. Amen.