

Hespeler, 6 December 2020 © Scott McAndless – Communion  
Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15, Mark 1:1-8

**G**ood morning. It is Monday, November 9, 2020, and we take you now live to the headquarters of international drug companies, Pfizer and BioNTech for an announcement that that world has been waiting for:

Good morning, Scott, I am standing outside of the building where a stunning announcement has been made. The chief executive officers of Pfizer and BioNTech just came out to announce, and I quote, “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says the corporation. “Speak tenderly to the world, and cry to it that it has served its term, that its penalty is paid, that it has already received from the deadly coronavirus a double portion of suffering.

“For unto us, a vaccine has been born and an inoculation has been given. And behold, it’s efficacy shall be established at 90%.”

That is the announcement, Scott, though I would note that there is a little bit of fine print. There are a few steps yet to be accomplished. The vaccine will have to receive final approval and, of course it will have to be manufactured in significant quantities. But that’s not even the most complicated part. The companies say that, in its original form, the vaccine will have to be stored at -80 degrees Celsius, which will definitely complicate distribution. There is also the thorny necessity of convincing the vast majority of a population that, over the last little while, has discovered that it has some reasons to be wary of political authorities and medical experts, to actually take a vaccine that might make them feel sick for a short time.

And so, between now and the time when a sufficient portion of the population can be vaccinated and herd immunity be attained, there is a whole lot of work to be done. Basically, to get from here to there, we’re going to have to build a distribution highway. And you know how you build a highway: **“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 I know that that sounds like a lot of work and that it’s going to take a lot of time, but, my friends, this really is still good news. Our salvation has arrived! Take comfort, O my people.

I have said it many times during this difficult year of 2020. Again and again as I open the scriptures during this year, I read familiar passages that I thought I understood and I see them in an entirely different light. And that is



true yet again on this second Sunday in Advent. Every year around this time, the church traditionally reads from the fortieth chapter of the Book of Isaiah. We not only read it, but we also sing it or hear it sung as one of the most favorite arias of Handel's Messiah. The passage is so powerful that you would think that it could not more deeply affect me this year than it has in the past, but it has.

This part of the Book of Isaiah was originally written to people facing a very difficult historical struggle. It is addressed to the people of Israel who have, for far too long, been living in exile in the land of Babylon. Forcibly taken from homes, they have been made to live in a strange land surrounded by strange gods and strange customs. It has been extremely hard for them. But, in this passage, the prophet comes to them with some exciting, good news.

Babylon has fallen (or maybe it's just clear that it's about to fall) and the Persian Empire is about to take over its territories. And that might not seem like a big deal, I mean, who cares if you exchange one overlord for another, but actually it is. The thing that makes that good news is that Cyrus, the king of the Persians, has a different policy about exiles. As far as he is concerned, if they want to go back home, they can. Yes, the good news of the moment is that the people of Israel can finally go back home.

And it is in that context that the prophet says, **“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, 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.”** He is announcing that the exile is over by saying that God has decided that the people have suffered enough.

But, like I say, I really found those words sounded very different to me this year after we have seen our society struggling with an extended period of suffering caused by a pandemic. And when that announcement of a vaccine came, it certainly seemed like the very same kind of announcement of comfort to a people.

So, the words of the prophet certainly hit me on a different emotional level this year, but there was also something else that really struck me, something that I hadn't seen before. When these words of comfort appear, it's like a sudden announcement that everything is going to change for the better. The announcement of the vaccine sounded like that too. But, after that initial euphoria, there comes a let's-get-down-to-earth moment when we realize that there is still a long way to go before we get there, that the road is going to be difficult and that it might even get worse before it gets better. I think we've all been feeling that as well.

Well, the same thing happens in this prophecy from the Book of Isaiah. Because, you see, no sooner did the prophet announce this incredible, wonderful news that the exile was over, than the people had to deal with a

huge realization. The people were in Babylon, and Babylon was a long, long way from Jerusalem. I mean, not only was it about a thousand kilometers in an age where most people travelled on foot, but it was a thousand kilometers across the biggest, most uncrossable terrain in the entire world – a vast desert.

So, immediately after announcing this enormous comfort, the prophet goes on to announce a gigantic work project: **“A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”** It was a highway for the people to return home and a very difficult highway to build: **“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.”** That’s right, we need to bring in the bulldozers and level the whole terrain, and that’s all before you can even start to lay down the asphalt!

Now, to be clear here, this passage is not describing the construction of an *actual* highway to take the people home. This is poetry – a poetic way of saying that it’s going to be a long and difficult process that takes a lot of work to get the people home. But it is still a stunning change of tone from the original promise – we go from supernatural comfort to a major public works project that has to be completed before the promise is fulfilled.

But that is how life often goes. We are told that we get to go home, but then we have to build the highway to get there; the vaccine gets announced but there is all this other work to be done before its promise is realized. This is the kind of thing that keeps on happening and so this passage is forever new – forever speaking to the hopes and the frustrations of delays that people have to live with.

Which is, of course, why, when the author of the Gospel of Mark was trying to capture the mood in Galilee just before Jesus appeared on the scene, he turned to this very same passage in the Book of Isaiah. He describes John the Baptizer as, **“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”**

Now, on the surface, it might seem that what has happened here is that Mark has just misunderstood the original meaning of the Book of Isaiah. The original prophecy said, **“A voice cries, ‘Prepare the way in the wilderness.’”** And Mark has changed that to **“A voice in the wilderness cries, ‘Prepare the way.’”** That is pretty close, but it is not exactly the same thing and Mark makes that change because Mark does see John himself as the voice that is crying in the wilderness because John preached out in the wilderness.

But I do not think that this is simply a mistaken interpretation on the part of the gospel writer. It is rather his way of saying that the ministry of John the Baptizer was a fulfillment of what had been anticipated in the prophecy in Isaiah, not literally in the sense that John was building a

highway out there, but certainly in the sense that John's call had so much in common with that of the ancient prophet.

In fact, I think we should greet the message of John the Baptizer today in almost exactly the same way that the ancient exiles in Babylon greeted the ancient prophet's message – which is to say, much like how we received the news of the successful vaccine trials.

When John announces, “**The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals,**” how should we react? We should greet that news – the news that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ to show us the power of God's love and salvation – with joy because that means that the end of the story is written. God will bring us home. Because of Jesus we can know for sure that God's purposes will not be thwarted and that our destiny and indeed the destiny of the whole world is safe in God's hands.

And yet at the same time we cannot help but recognize that there is still some highway building to do before we get from here to there. And now especially, during this season of Advent, we are living in that tension between the promise of the coming of Christ, a promise that is sure and certain, and the simple reality that we are not quite there yet.

Because of Jesus because of his incarnation, because of his extraordinary teaching and example, because of his death and his resurrection, God has accomplished it all. The world *is* reconciled to God in Christ. The kingdom of God *is* established in the face of all the powers, principalities and rulers of this world. And we *are* forgiven, renewed and reconciled to God. That work is all done. As Jesus said on the cross at the very last, “**It is finished,**” which could also be translated as, “It has all been accomplished.”

And yet we are still in that waiting place. That is, by the way, what the season of Advent is all about; it is about life in the waiting place. Because, while everything is in place for all of that salvation to play out, we are still stuck here preparing for it all to be rolled out, for the highway to be built through the desert, for the vaccine to be approved and manufactured and safely distributed. That salvation is there, we can almost taste it, it is in the sights in the smells of this season of wonder, but there is still that sense of not quite yet.

And as Christians we are called to live into that promise. We are called to offer hope to people, to let them know that God has done the work and it is completed. And we are also called to live as if it were already so, and, in so doing we will make it so. That is our job. That is how we build the highway through the desert.