

## “Good News At Last!”

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First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

### FIRST READING: Isaiah 40:1-11

“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.”

A voice cries out: “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.” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” 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.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; 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!” See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before 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.

### SECOND READING: Isaiah 63:15-17; 64:1-9

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

I wonder how many people were still listening by the time the words of Isaiah 40 were finally uttered for the first time, and how many of those who heard those words stood there more than half-braced for the other shoe to drop. I mean, how often does God send a prophet to tell a group of people that they are “doing a fine job, and just keep it up”? Prophets are not Hallmark greeting cards. But then again, when do such words as these come to anyone...at any time...?

“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.”

Are we hearing what we think we are hearing? Is it really what it sounds like...

Good news at last?

How long have we all waited—including God—for Good News at last?

That’s the way the abrupt change from Isaiah 39 to Isaiah 40 has seemed to a lot of people through the centuries. Yes, there are some marvelous visions of the future in Isaiah 1-40, some amazing ones, in fact.

But from Isaiah 40:1 onward, the plane of hope really takes off. For people who have heard and then lived through bad news, this is news that sounds too good to be true. Now, after all this time, God is not just sending another prophet. God is coming personally, in the person of the Servant of the Lord. And God will put right everything that is wrong, because it will take God to do that. No human beings alone can do it. It is Isaiah’s real life telling of a Humpty Dumpty story. Human beings have broken what cannot be fixed—not without God’s personal intervention.

And the Good News is that God is *personally* on the way.

...which means that we human beings are now being met with hope, unimaginable hope, as we talked about last Sunday. What we human beings can’t fix, God has taken on personally to fix.

And when God does arrive and enact God’s salvation, what follows is peace. Which brings us to today.

But the truth is that we in the world are not very good at peace, as any news broadcast will remind us.

Peace in the world, as the angels declared, “Glory to God in the highest and peace on the earth!”

Thankfully, the reality of peace is what God does—God will create peace. People will live among each other in new ways. People will live with God and with God’s creation in a new way. The world will be a safe and just place, because God will be in our midst and uphold this new way of life.

And this “macro” vision of peace, this reality that God is creating with the arrival of God’s own presence in our midst is not in question, at least as far as Isaiah or the prophets are concerned. What this new inpouring of peace does invite and even demand from me is that I also embrace this peace within me, both for myself and others.

Unfortunately, I personally am not very strong in the whole area of peace. I tend to stay focused on what problems I am facing, or think that I soon will, so I am generally in the classic “fight or flight” mindset. At the very least, I live with my heart braced for bad news and my shoulders tensed with stressed muscles ready to react.

The result is that someone often has to put their hands on my shoulders and say to me, “It’s going to be okay. God is going to handle this.”

And I nod and say, “Right, sure. I know that.” And maybe I relax a little, but you would have to look hard to see it.

So, the very same person, or another person, will soon have to do the same thing, place hands on my shoulders and look me in the eye and say, “Look, things are going to be okay. God is already working on this.” And I say with a little more assurance and authenticity, “Yes, that’s true. I believe that.”

But it quite often takes at least the third time, with the hands on my shoulders and with a searching tone in the person’s voice to say, “It really is going to be okay, however this turns out, because God is here and is going to take care of this.” And often with a lump in my throat, or with a deep sigh from my chest, I feel my shoulders relax at long last, and I breathe in some peace.

So, yes, I can well imagine that both Isaiah and John the Baptist faced people who, like me at least, seem adept at standing at a distance from both the truth about ourselves and the hope that will save us.

And those two things really to travel together, and we all know it when we are struggling with a problem that genuinely touches us. I don’t want to hear from a doctor that I have a serious illness, but if I do, I want the next words out of her mouth to be, “But we can deal with this. There is a solution. There is real reason for hope.” Because then, my heart can still cling to that fragile peace that allows me to function.

As much as we don’t want to hear bad news, we all know that what scares us the most is that we may not know about a problem that we do have. It’s one thing for our cars to fool our mechanics into telling us there is no problem when the sound we have been hearing magically goes away as we drive up to the garage. But it is another to be unaware or be unable to find anyone who can identify the problem we have within ourselves.

So it really does take truth and hope together to produce the gift and the grace of peace. So here are the voices of Isaiah and John the Baptist, neither one the least bit shy about identifying problems also telling us...Good News. After all the bad news, there is Good News at last.

God knows what our problems and failures are, the things we can’t fix. And God is on God’s way to put all those things right. So, yes, it is time to do whatever it takes to get ready for God to arrive and the problems to be solved.

And you would think that surely at Christmas we can do that, wouldn’t you? Or that at least I as a minister could and should. What else is Advent but God’s arrival among us to save us?

But truth be told, I stay tensed in my shoulders, resistant to peace. It starts the same way each November. Every year on the Friday after Thanksgiving, Emma does the same thing. Lovingly, and with the joy that arises only in a person of a truly pure heart, she puts out Christmas decorations. And every year, I do the same thing I do—I Grinch about all the work. Is it really worth it?

Is there really going to be peace on earth, as the angels announced? Will peace begin with me? With us?

There is a song we sing that has the line, “I’ve got peace like a river,” and it is a wonderful thought.

But all week as I have tried to coach myself along the path of peace, I have tried to connect with “peace like a river.” Now some of you have river stories, and the river is indeed a place where you go to find peace, no doubt about it whatsoever. But I don’t have a river story. I have a pond story, but that involves cattails, as you may recall, and falling backward into the water while wearing waders.

On the other hand, I do have a creek story, and so for me, maybe it is “peace like a creek” that I am aiming for. The creek on our farm runs the full length of the southern border of our property in Marshall County.

At one corner of our property there is a bridge. And, of course, all the water that flows in our creek has to pass under it, through the piers of that bridge.

Now last year, I looked down at the creek from that bridge, on the upstream side and what I saw depressed me. It was a massive blockage of trees, dirt, rock, tires—and a lawn chair. Yes, tires and a lawn chair. And it was such a huge logjam that it was blocking up the creek and backing it up from flowing onto our property. My brother and I talked about how in the world we would ever be able to clear all of it away, even with two chainsaws and a tractor.

But you know what?

We didn't have to, because in one of those really big rains, the creek got up so high and was running so strong that it washed all of the trees and tires and dirt and, yes, even the tires and the lawn chair right out of there.

Peace is like that. We think that peace is a nice, sweet idea, when actually it is another word for the arrival of the Kingdom of heaven in our very midst, and nothing, not anything can ever stop that. We throw up barriers and dams, we find our lives blocked by all the things that get swept into them, but the truth is that our lives are watered by nothing less than the faithful God of all creation, who pours out peace on this world, a peace powerful enough to wash away all the things that would block the arrival of God in our world. And if you have ever seen just our creek at flood stage, you would know that nothing can hold it back, much less hold back the arrival of God among us.

Now, of course, there were still problems that floated into the creek or fell into. I mean, tires? Really, did someone have to throw tires into the creek? Or a lawn chair? We human beings trash up our own lives, and yes, we throw garbage into each other's lives, and we foul the waters of peace and justice that are meant to flow through our lives.

And yes, there are those times when we stop to wonder if God is really on our side—as when a huge oak tree fell into our creek, and yet once again, I wailed from the creek bank, “What have I done that I am being punished with yet another problem?” I do that all too often, stand on the banks of my own life and wonder aloud if God is really there, or if God is more against me than for me, or is testing me or punishing me.

But you know what happened, don't you? The power of the waters of that creek washed all that away, too. Or really, what it did was push them to the side of the main flow so that the huge logs helped reinforce the creek bank, and I could reach the tires and the other stuff, to pull it all out and see the creek healthy again.

I think Isaiah and John the Baptist were promising that the waters of God's salvation were going to flow, and they would be more than enough to handle our sins and our fears, our lack of faith and our failures.

But the real wonder of wonders on our creek is at the other corner of our farm, where the creek descends into a maze of huge rocks, some of them higher than my head.

It is called, “Rock Creek,” after all, and this is Marshall County we are talking about.

What amazes me at this corner of the farm is what someone did years ago, with a spirit that would make John the Baptist sit up and take notice in the amount of heart it took. Someone(s) took sledge hammers and chiseled through those rocks and cut a channel maybe 30 feet wide and 4 feet deep clean through those huge limestone boulders. And it produced the prettiest waterfall on our entire property. So, Doing whatever it takes to open the flowing of God's peace, yes...by all means, even if it is hard work on the rock of our lives, let us do it.

But what always gets me as I stand there in awe of that hard work is the fact that over time, the waters of the creek have themselves dug a parallel channel, so that the waters flow right along that channel over the biggest rocks when the big floods come. Nothing, not even solid rock, can hold back the waters.

Dear friends, hear the Good News. Our God's salvation is here, and its waters are rising and its power is unstoppable. That is the reason our hope is unending, even when our own hearts and spirits break or sag.

And the peace that God is bringing is just as unstoppable, just as irresistible, just as overwhelming. We may think that the waters of peace run dry, like our creek did for a while, but the waters of life are always building for the next rising, and there is no stopping the arrival of God's goodness in our world and in our lives.

It comes as a cleansing, dramatic, transforming flood, and as a gentle, soothing, calm stream. It is peace because it reveals what needs to be changed and then changes it, because the power of God can and will, when nothing else, even our hardest spiritual labor cannot.

Dear friends, this Christmas, let us do at least one thing. Relax our shoulders, and breathe in peace, drink it in, and let God refresh us with clear and pure water straight from the wells of God's grace and salvation. Let us welcome change, as we see the need, but know that all the changes are for purposes of God's grace.

Yes, things seem to block that peace, and we do terrible things that threaten to block it. But the waters of God's grace and peace are still flowing and the crest is coming because God will personally arrive in our midst in full majesty and revelation. And God will create the peace we all need. And give it to each of us.

Let us accept it, and be people of peace inside and out, within ourselves and with all the people around us.

It's good news at last. The gift of peace is already here and the full waters of life are coming. Amen.