

Sunday December 6 2020 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church

**Bible Study – Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-18
“Clean-Up Crew”**

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, share an experience of being in a messy room or house.

Isaiah 40:1-11 Context: The book of Isaiah falls into two main sections. Chapters 1-39 record the oracles and prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose ministry spans the second half of the 8th century BC (roughly 742-690). Starting with chapter 40 the text reflects the ministry of an anonymous servant who suffered and was killed in the closing days of the Exile in Babylon which ended in 539 BC. This week’s reading is set in the context of the “heavenly court:” God begins with a pronouncement to the heavenly host to bring comfort to God’s people as the desolation of Jerusalem – a result of the sins of the people – is coming to an end. A heavenly voice elaborates: Jerusalem, that had been turned into a wilderness, will be renewed and transformed as she becomes again the place where the glory of God will be revealed. Another heavenly voice calls on the servant/prophet to pass on the message. But the servant can only express his despair over the fleeting and fallible nature of human existence that can hardly comprehend the glory of God that is being proclaimed. Still, the good news of God’s renewed presence in Zion, in Jerusalem, cannot be suppressed: God will return to Zion and protect and nourish God’s people – reversing the punishment and judgment they had suffered in exile.

Mark 1:1-18 Context: The opening sentence of this week's reading is an introduction, both to the gospel as a whole and to the account of John the Baptist. It is an appeal to prepare for the coming of the Lord, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah (see above) both at the end of time, and in the lives of Jesus and John. The evangelist’s description of John’s garments evokes the description of the prophet Elijah, who was widely believed to have been taken up into heaven alive in a chariot of fire and who was to return as the forerunner of the Messiah. John’s baptism is a new thing in Jewish piety. Although the Jews practiced various purification rituals, John’s contemporaries understood that his baptism was something more: a baptism of repentance. In turn, his baptism becomes a sign of the baptism of the One who is about to come, the baptism of God’s own Spirit.

Read Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-18

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn’t make sense to you in the story?

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

Read Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:18 again

Some reflection questions – Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

- Both passages talk about preparing a highway in the desert, about valleys being made low and uneven ground being made smooth. What is this imagery trying to convey?
- What was the situation of Isaiah's first hearers? [They were in exile. They felt abandoned by God. They were in a foreign land that felt uncaring, and many were persecuted and suffering.] How has 2020 felt somewhat similar to being in exile?
- Isaiah's first hearers were longing for an end to exile, for justice to be done, and for a return home. But this returning home could not look like life as it was before. How is home both a place of comfort and a place of challenge? How does the church function as both a place of comfort and a place of challenge? How is the season of Advent a calling to a better version of home?
- What do we learn about God from these passages?
- What are we called to do in/from these passages? see (Isaiah 40:3); (Isaiah 40:9)
- What practices can we take on this week to help prepare ourselves and others to experience the comfort and challenge of God's grace?

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Each person prays sharing their answer the following statements:

I ask God for....

I thank God for.....

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, pray the closing prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the group or read the following prayer in unison:

Faithful God, we stand in awe of your compassion toward us. When we have been faithless, you have been faithful. This has been true throughout the generations, yet your steadfast love continues to pursue us and draw us closer into your love. May we be empowered as witness of your compassion, forgiveness, and love that others might see you in us. **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord's Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,

on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.