

Sunday, December 10, 2023 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church
Bible Study
Second Sunday of Advent
“Our Just Peace”
Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). Play the aria “Comfort Ye My People” (or from YouTube, [Jerry Hadley - Comfort ye my people -Messiah - Handel - YouTube](#)). In pairs or groups of three, have participants describe in a few sentences the image of the “way of the Lord” in the desert land of the Israelites. What would that look like in your own community?

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 1:1-8. 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 1:1-8.

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what images stand out or come to mind for you, what questions do you have, or what doesn't make sense to you in the text?

Read Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8 again -

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

- Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope to a people who are in exile from their own land. How can you understand and appreciate this good news in a position of relative comfort and safety? What are the barren and “exile” places in your own life? Does this passage bring comfort there? If so, why and how?
- Read aloud Isaiah 40:11. If you can, use a picture of the Good Shepherd (such as [Katherine Brown's image "Jesus and the Lamb."](#)) Ask: “Can you visualize yourself as a lamb in Jesus’ care? Are you able to be vulnerable enough to be cared for and held in the arms of God?” If this is difficult, spend a few minutes discussing what it means and what it takes to entrust yourself to one another and to God.
- Mark 1:2-3 likens Isaiah’s messenger to John the Baptizer—the one crying out in the wilderness. Who today raises the prophetic voice from the “wilderness” to call the community to repent, reform, or reclaim the good news? What does that wilderness look like today? What sort of resistance does that modern-day prophet encounter?
- John looked (and seemed) a bit wild to his contemporaries, yet the “whole Judean countryside” flocked to him and confessed their sins. What do you think made him such a compelling person? Can you imagine who today would have such compelling and legitimate power? What does it take for you to trust a call to repent and follow?
- Take a look at the promises made by or on behalf of a person being baptized ([United Methodist Hymnal, pp 34-35](#), or see below). Ask: “Are these promises you actively remember? Act upon? In what ways do you embrace the vow concerning justice? In what ways do you fulfill the promise to nurture others as a congregational member?”

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). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, end by praying the following or a similar prayer:

God of the wilderness and of the way of peace: We confess that we too often pray for solace, but not for strength; for pardon, but not renewal. We are grateful for your guidance, your comfort, and your grace. Inspire and move us to hear your prophetic word, to do justice, and to fulfill our baptismal vows. In the name of Christ. **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.