

Dare to Prepare
Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8
2nd Sunday of Advent

“A voice of one calling: “Prepare the way for the Lord.”” The purpose of the whole season of Advent can be summed up in this one phrase: “*Prepare the way for the Lord.*” These four weeks before Christmas – Advent is preparation time. A time to remember once again that old, old, story of when God came to be with us, Emmanuel, in Jesus, born in a manger. But Advent is also a time to look forward to that day when God will come again at the end of time to gather His people to Himself. That glorious day when the trumpet will sound and Jesus will come on the clouds of heaven. In the meantime, we wait. Jesus says, “Watch and be ready, because you don’t know when that day will come. Be ready. Don’t be caught with your long-johns down.” Well, that’s not exactly what Jesus said, but it gets at the gist, I think. God *is* coming, so be prepared. Be ready; watch for Him. God’s people are to be prepared for God’s coming. And God’s coming is not only in the past to be remembered or in the future to be anticipated. God comes *now*. God is Emmanuel – God with us – *now*. We talked about that last week.

But *how* does God come to us? And what does that look like? And how can we prepare for that coming? We know how to prepare for Christmas – we’ve been spending lots of time, effort, energy, and money doing that lately, haven’t we? We know how to prepare the way for Santa. But how do we prepare the way for the Lord Jesus to come? For surely He *has* come and *will* come and *does* come. If we are not prepared, it is likely we will miss it. How is God Emmanuel *now* – God with us *now* – and how can we prepare to encounter Him?

Isaiah tells us that God is Emmanuel by His Word. God is with us in and through the Word He speaks to us in the Scripture. Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” People do not live forever. Beauty, wealth, stuff, all fade away. Friends will let you down, lead you astray; parents will disappoint you; spouses and children will hurt you and desert you. But the word of God stands forever. It will never let you down, it will never disappoint you. It may challenge you, but it will never steer you wrong. It can be depended upon, trusted to be True. God is with us by His Word. Now, today, the word of the Lord comes to us. But the question is: Do we hear it? Will we respond to it?

This Advent, you need to prepare the way for the word of God to speak to your life. You need to put yourself in a position to hear God’s Word every day. You need to adopt an attitude of wanting to hear it, expecting to hear it. You need to actively listen for it. You need to prepare yourself to really hear it. Because there are lots of competing sounds of this season, lots of other words which threaten to drown out the Word of God that comes.

Now, the most obvious way to hear the Word this season is the same way we hear the Word any season: Read the Bible. I know, I know, you were looking for something a little more interesting, a little more innovative than ‘Read the Bible.’ I’m sorry – that’s all I’ve got: Read the Bible. Not just read the words printed on the page. *Receive them*. Take them into your heart and mind and spirit as if they are words of a love letter written by God directly and specifically and tenderly to you. Because they are. Pick up our devotional, *These Days*, and use it each day during this season. Read through one of the gospels. Choose one psalm to read and reflect on

each day. Read slowly, savoring each word, each phrase, listening for God's word *for you*. There are no awards for reading the most verses. Chew on each word, take time to digest each phrase, until you extract every bit of flavor and nourishment for your tired, hungry, and thirsty souls. The Bible says: "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Woman does not live by Christmas cookies alone... Try reading and reflecting on even just one verse each day that speaks to you. And then be prepared to *respond* to what you have heard God speak to you through His Word. Prepare to not only *hear* the Word, but to *do* the Word.

Now, you're going to have to prepare to receive God's Word by setting aside...TIME. Because I just bet none of you have these big blocks of time in your schedule that you just don't know what to do with. In order to prepare the way for Emmanuel to come to you through His everlasting, never-failing Word, you're going to have to decide that reading the Bible is a priority for you, and make it a non-negotiable part of your preparations for Emmanuel.

Second: God is Emmanuel by His power. Isaiah 40:10: "See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power..." Mark 1:8: "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." God is with us now by the Holy Spirit. He is the source of power and life. The power of God is with us by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. Do we even *recognize* that? And if we do, do we act on it? Do we depend on it? It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see the many ways God comes to us each day. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our ears and minds and spirits to hear the Word of God and gives us power to respond to what we hear. One of the primary ways we connect to this Holy Spirit power is through prayer. But here's the thing: Prayer requires stillness. And there's not a whole lot of *that* going around this season. In order to prepare the way for Emmanuel to come to you in power, you're going to have to decide to take the time to get still before God to pray, to hear His Word, to receive the power He offers you through His Spirit.

But God does not come only in power, as the mighty King and Sovereign Lord. God is Emmanuel as the shepherd. Listen again to Isaiah 40:11: "He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young." What a beautiful picture of Emmanuel! God comes not only with power and might, but with tenderness and love. The Shepherd is with us, to care for and lead us. Do we receive His tender care? And are we willing to follow where He leads?

This is perhaps the hardest for many of us. We know God wants to teach us through His Word and we recognize that God comes in power as King and Lord. But we also know ourselves. We know our sin, our doubt, our disobedience. We know what takes place in our minds and our hearts. And so it becomes difficult, maybe even impossible, to believe that God could truly love somebody like us. That God would forgive somebody like us. We don't have much trouble telling other people that God loves them. We don't have much trouble telling other people that God will forgive their sin. But it's often so very difficult for us to believe that about ourselves. It's so very difficult for us to *receive* that for ourselves.

"In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." What needs to be straightened out in your life so that God can come to you in power and

love? The Amplified Bible says it this way: “Clear away the obstacles.” What are the obstacles to God’s coming in *your* life this Advent season?

Busy-ness. This is the number one obstacle, I think, and not only this time of year. We are so busy preparing for the coming of Christmas that we fail to prepare for Christ who comes. Listen, I don’t know how much more simply or directly than this I can put it: If you are too busy to read the Bible every day, you are too busy. If you are too busy to find time to pray, time to be still in the presence of Emmanuel every day, you are too busy. Your priorities are out of order. I know you already know all this. You know that Christmas is not really about the tree and the lights and the presents and the cookies and the parties. We know it, but somehow we don’t take steps to change it. Look: Nobody can put anything on your calendar without your permission. We all find time, make time, for the things that really matter to us. The only one who can do what it takes to make you *less* busy is you. So you need to decide.

Another obstacle is perfectionism. Not all of us suffer from this one, but I do. Things have to be just so. The best and most perfect decorations, the best and most perfect party. Here’s my advice to all you perfectionists out there: Make a decision this season to adopt *the good-enough principle*. Decide to make time for what really needs preparation – your heart and mind and spirit – by not insisting on perfection. Let good enough be good enough.

I think perfectionism is related to another obstacle: approval addiction. Wanting to meet everybody else’s expectations. Needing to get everybody else’s approval. What about *God’s* expectations? What about getting *God’s* approval? You know, we say “Jesus is the reason for the season,” and that’s true. And it *sounds* so nice. We *say* that, but what do we really *do* about it?

The gospel writer, Mark, says the one about whom Isaiah wrote, the one calling in the desert, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” was none other than Jesus’ cousin, John, AKA John the Baptist. When John the Baptist came preaching, “Prepare the way for the Lord,” Mark tells us he came preaching repentance. “Prepare” in the Hebrew means to turn, turn toward, or turn away from. To turn away, put out of the way, make clear, clear away. So preparing for the coming of Emmanuel will involve making some decisions, setting some priorities about what to turn toward, and what to turn away from. What obstacles to clear away. “Prepare the way for the Lord,” John said, “Make straight paths for Him.” This implies that the paths are *not* straight, they are crooked, filled with bumps and pot holes – obstacles to the coming of God.

Interestingly, the words for repentance in the Bible also involve turning: turning away from sin, turning away from attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to God’s desires for us, and turning toward God, turning toward His power to live as He desires. To repent is to change your mind, to turn around and go in a different direction. So in order to prepare we need to repent. So I invite you – I encourage you, I *dare* you – to take a ruthless inventory of your life: behavior, attitudes, heart. I pray that each and every one of us here today would identify one obstacle in your life that gets in the way of God’s coming to you each day. One obstacle to your experiencing God as Emmanuel. And then decide to remove it, clear it away, prepare the way.

We've been studying Isaiah in Bible study this fall and we just got to chapter 40 this week. For 39 chapters, the prophet has shown how one can depend on God to dispense judgment and punishment to those who break His covenant, do not obey His Law. But now, another word from God; one word: "Comfort." One word in the imperative, repeated again for emphasis.

"Comfort, comfort." "Comfort, comfort my people, say your God." *My people. Your God.* Reminders of God's ultimate tenderness and kindness. The good news of God's coming is that – even though we have disobeyed and denied and disappointed God – even though we *don't* hear His Word, *don't* receive His power, *don't* trust His love, God stills claims us as His own people and is still willing to be our God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." "Speak tenderly to My people, exiled to a foreign land..." "Speak tenderly" here is literally, "Speak to the heart." Elsewhere in the Scripture, these words are translated as "encourage."

Dear ones, God wants to encourage you today! God wants so desperately to "speak tenderly" to you, to encourage you with the knowledge, the certainty – the promise – that your sin has been paid for. And so, we need no longer fear judgment and punishment; God promises restoration. And this restoration is accomplished by the personal intervention of God Himself. He did not send an assistant. He did not send a legion of angels. He came Himself.

So be encouraged today! Be comforted, today, because the Lord is coming! God comes. God comes not only in power and might, but in tenderness and love and forgiveness and hope. At the time Isaiah wrote, Israel's only hope was God breaking into history to save them, to restore them to a relationship of tenderness and encouragement and forgiveness. And as we hear Isaiah's words today, our only hope is God breaking into our lives. Our only hope is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who comes to us to tenderly care for and feed us and lead us. Our only hope is Jesus, who goes ahead of us to the cross. Our only hope is Jesus, who comes to us in simple elements of bread and grape juice. God comes to you today, in many ways. But maybe most especially, here at this Table.

God comes, and He invites us to come. Unprepared as we are, crookedness and obstacles and sin and all, God says, "Come. Let me gather you in my arms, little lambs. Come and let me carry you close to my heart."