

## ***Tidings of Comfort and Joy***

Isaiah 40:1-11

Center Church, Hartford

December 6, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

This year, I am singing the carol “God rest ye” like a plea: “Oh! Tidings of comfort and joy! Please!!” I am pleading that the good Christian folk from the carol will have nothing about which to be dismayed! I am hearing the words of Isaiah like a deep desire of the soul: “Comfort, O comfort my people, God. Speak tenderly to Hartford and Wethersfield and Cromwell and Windsor and Bloomfield and Washington, D.C.” In the midst of pandemic and a winter of our discontent in so many parts of life, all over the world, in a time when it is hard to give comfort to people when we feel like we can’t hold hands or embrace each other safely, in the second week of Advent where we yearn for peace, comes the voice crying in the wilderness from the mouth of the prophet Isaiah: Prepare the way of the Lord!

We hear these words every year, and many of us have sung them in hymns and cantatas: “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.”

Listen to what is being said here about God entering into our world, about where the way is being prepared.

Where is this highway, the route by which God comes to us? Is it in a paradise like Eden? Or a city of gold? No. It’s in a desert. A place where all life thirsts all the time. A place where danger lurks in the hot sun. Isaiah, and then John the Baptist quoting him in Jesus’ time, say to us that, as Henri Nouwen puts it in modern times, God “is coming not after all our misery is passed, but in the middle of it.” God’s path to us is in our desert.

And what happens in that desert? All the barriers to our ability to connect with God are moved aside. Mountains and hills, deep valleys, rough places, all will become level ground where we can receive the one who reaches out to us and to all people with open arms, the one who can

hug us no matter if there is a pandemic or if we are afraid and hiding from everyone or if we have simply turned away. Grief, fear, loneliness, isolation, uncertainty, financial hardship, sickness, broken relationships, infertility, doubt, addictions, imprisonment, the daily frustrations of helping children do school remotely or only seeing relatives on a screen or having all that was “normal” stripped away: all these mountains and valleys and rough places are pushed aside by God, and we are all welcomed from high or low or rough or uneven ground onto the plain where God waits for us. Where we can hear the herald of good tidings who has gone up the mountain to shout and be heard everywhere that God comes! God comes with might, yes, but God also comes like this: a shepherd who will feed the flock, who will gather us as lambs in his arms and carry us in her bosom and lead even those whose job it has been to care for little sheep (hear that you parents out there!).

The word “Advent” means “coming.” In this case, both the understanding that the “coming” has already happened, that God came to earth in Jesus out of an unbelievable well of love. And that God keeps coming to us in a whole variety of ways in our lives, if we are paying attention, especially when we are in the desert or feel like those high mountains and deep valleys are making life a challenge. The carol “God Rest Ye” sings “let nothing you dismay; remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day.” Remember. If you have forgotten, this is the season for remembering. The prophet Isaiah continues on to say, near the end of chapter 40, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” In other words, have you forgotten what you already know? “The Lord is an everlasting God, who does not faint or grow weary, whose understanding is beyond comprehension, who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord” (Advent is all about waiting) “shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy. O tidings of comfort and joy. Amen.