

SERMON FOR 12-7-2014 ADVENT 2

The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i
United Church of Christ

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

Message: **"Advent 2: Keeping Christ in
Christmas 2014"**

Kekapa P.K. Lee



GATHERING IN THE WORD OF GOD

Today on this 2nd Sunday in Advent—Isaiah’s and Mark’s words involve comforting the afflicted—the distressed, the grieving, the hurt, and the troubled!

The key message of Advent is that at the stable at Bethlehem God is not only keeping promises God made to Israel but also making promises to us—that in Jesus—God hears our cries of fear and concern and doubt at our lowest points—and God will respond!

We are to “Keep Christ in Christmas!”

HEARING THE WORD OF GOD

Isaiah 40:1-11 (The VOICE Bible)

40 ¹ “Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.

² “With gentle words, *tender and kind*, assure Jerusalem, *this chosen city from long ago*, that her battles are over. *The terror, the bloodshed, the horror of my punishing work is done*. This place has paid for its guilt; iniquity is pardoned; its term of incarceration is complete. It has endured double the punishment it was due.”

³ A voice is wailing, “In the wilderness, get it ready! Prepare the way; make it a straight shot. The Eternal would have it so. Straighten the way in the *wandering* desert to make the *crooked* road wide and straight for our God.

⁴ Where there are steep valleys, treacherous descents, *raise the highway*; lift it up; bring down the dizzying heights. Fill in the potholes and gullies, the rough places. Iron out the shoulders flat and wide.

⁵ *The Lord will be, really be, among us.*

The *radiant* glory of the Lord will be revealed.

All flesh together will take it in. *Believe it.*

None other than God, the Eternal, has spoken."

During the time of Jesus, John the Baptist wanders around Israel in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets warning the people that they need to correct their attitudes and behaviors, to bring them better in line with what God expects and desires. He declares (warns, actually) that God is coming and will set things right. During the circumstances of exile, the people don't fully understand who or what this voice in the wilderness will be; centuries later, as the early Christian community looks back over the life of Jesus and John, they recognize the anonymous voice.

⁶ A voice says, "Declare!"

But what shall I declare?

All life is like the grass.

All of its grace and beauty fades like the *wild* flowers in a field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades as the breath of the Eternal One blows away. People are no different from grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; nothing lasts except the word of our God. It will stand forever.

Isaiah's message is not just doom and gloom. God determines that His people may return home to rebuild their lives! God uses the new king, Cyrus of Persia, to accomplish this glorious restoration. God does not allow His punishment to last forever.

Now, in this new time, God smoothes the rocky way between Mesopotamia and all Israel; He makes the deserts between the present place of exile and their home just east of the Mediterranean Sea burst with sweet water and bloom with

beauty and good things to eat. Treacherous roads and threatening beasts yield to God's desire that they return safely.

In chapters 40–55, for the most part, the message is one of comfort and encouragement to God's downtrodden and discouraged people. Many centuries later, these words will be understood in light of the Anointed One.

⁹ Ascend a high mountain, you herald of good tidings, O Zion; with a *clear*, strong voice make known to everyone the joy *that belongs to God's chosen place*, O, Jerusalem, You herald of good tidings! Make the news ring out! Don't be afraid! Say to these cities, this Judah: "Behold your God!"

¹⁰ The Lord, the Eternal, comes with power, with *unstoppable* might; He will take control *without question or delay*. He will see to it that wages are paid, repairs are made, *and all is set right again*.

¹¹ He will feed His fold like a shepherd; He will gather together His lambs—*the weak and the wobbly ones*—into His arms. He will carry them close to His bosom, and tenderly lead like a shepherd the mother of her lambs.

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The opening words of Isaiah 40, verse 1 are most famous, "*Comfort, comfort my people,*" says your God." The word 'comfort' is a combination of the Latin words "*cum-fortis*" or "*with strength*." Before comfort is experienced by us as some tender and cozy sign of relief—comfort comes first as a bracing, in-your-face message about what is what in life. We first need to be discomforted and made profoundly uneasy and

uncomfortable before we will be able to experience the depth of our only comfort!

If we are going to be comforted we need to begin by confronting all that's wrong with life. Remember too—that the people of Israel have been in captivity and suffering. Verse 2 makes it clear that the source of their suffering had been their own sinfulness. **Comfort doesn't come to those who deserve a reward—but comfort comes to those who have already felt the pain and the sting of where sin can lead us in our lives!**

Verse 3 says to us that the **way of the Lord** begins smack in the middle of the wilderness! It's in the wilderness—that biblical location of evil—that God begins to construct God's highway to shalom and peace. If God's salvation is going to emerge and come to light from anywhere—it will come from the middle of our life's ugliness and dreadfulness! What's more—these verses reminds us that **we need God to be the One who will lead us out of the wilderness because on our own we can do nothing!** Nothing!

Therefore, we need to own up to the reality of sin in our lives. We need to meet God in the wilderness and then admit that we are too weak, too *grass-like* to save ourselves. **In fact—given our sin—considering the mess we're in and being weak—we need to turn ourselves over to God completely!** If and when we do that—then the bottom line of Isaiah 40 can become our

reality: **we will be the lambs safely nestled and cuddled in the arms of the shepherd!**

And in the New Testament we encounter and meet the Good Shepherd Jesus!

Mark 1:1-8 (The VOICE Bible)

When Mark writes in the first chapter about a mysterious man entering the scene, instantly the reader recognizes there's something very different about Jesus. He comes into the picture not as a rock star but rather as someone humble, kind, and yet, still kingly. Mark describes the people who are drawn toward this man as regular people who have become affected by the character, passion, and light of this strange Galilean.

Maybe that's why Mark jumps right into the action of Jesus' story. Mark offers little by way of introduction. Mark writes nothing about Jesus' family tree. Unlike Matthew and Luke, he doesn't mention His birth. Mark's retelling begins with Scripture and the preaching of John the Baptist who calls people to repent. Like all the greats of history, Jesus doesn't just arrive—He is announced—and who better than John to do that? Right before Jesus makes His entrance into Mark's narrative, John says, "I've washed you here with water, but when He gets here, He will wash you in the Spirit of God."

1 This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Anointed One, *the Liberating King*, the Son of God.

² Isaiah the prophet told us *what would happen before He came*:

Watch, I will send my messenger in front of you to prepare your way and make it clear *and straight*.

³ *You'll hear him*, a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Eternal One,

a straight way in the wandering desert, a highway for our God.”

⁴ *That messenger was* John the Baptist, who appeared in the desert *near the Jordan River* preaching that people should be ritually cleansed through baptism *with water as a sign of* both their changed hearts and God’s forgiveness of their sins. ⁵ People from across the countryside of Judea and from the city of Jerusalem came to him and confessed that they were deeply flawed and needed help, so he cleansed them with the waters of the Jordan. ⁶ John dressed *as some of the Hebrew prophets had*, in clothes made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist. He made his meals *in the desert* from locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He preached a message *in the wilderness*.

John the Baptist: Someone is coming who is a lot more powerful than I am—One whose sandals I’m not worthy to bend down and untie. ⁸ I’ve washed you here through baptism with water; *but when He gets here*, He will wash you in the Spirit of God.

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In our time of Advent 1 & 2 our lessons come from Mark. Mark’s Gospel, compared to the other three—Matthew, Luke, and John—is kind of sparse and Mark wastes no words. Mark’s favorite Greek adverb is *euthus* which means **immediately!** Mark was in a hurry to get the story of Jesus across.

No one understood Jesus and who he was—is. No one understood him, no one got Jesus' identity and nature right, and even Jesus himself is constantly asking for silence every time someone is ready to identify him publicly as God's Christ.

Jesus knew that only his death on the cross would unlock his true identity and when Jesus dies and then is raised again—it's the angel that tells the women to go to Galilee to see Jesus. In this Advent 2014—we too need to go back to Galilee and re-read the Gospel. Once we have been to the cross and come to understand the true nature of Jesus as Messiah—then we can re-read the whole story through new eyes!

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God! This is where Mark begins his story. Mark takes us further back into the past to the words of a dusty old prophet named Isaiah come centuries and centuries earlier. Mark is, after all, the one evangelist in the New Testament who is forever in a hurry to get the story of Jesus told.

Mark knows we must begin in the wilderness with John the Baptist. We must begin with getting baptized because if we're not willing to meet the Savior with repentance in hand—then we may not find any motivation to meet and greet the Savior at all! Mark knows that Jesus came for but one reason—to liberate and release the cosmos from its bondage to sin and decay.

Advent is the beginning of the new Church Year (3 year cycle). We're resetting the ecclesiastical clock and

bringing everything back to the starting like as the Son of God becomes flesh and gets born into this world. Mark is here to remind us that the Christmas Story is not the beginning of the gospel. The Christmas Story is a tiny piece of the entire gospel which is *itself*, in its entirety—only “the beginning” of a cosmic story so vast—we’ll never fully comprehend it but can only let ourselves get gracefully and delightfully caught up in it all!

DOING THE WORD OF GOD

So on this 2nd Sunday in Advent—what is God’s Word to us this morning?

1. ONE: WE MUST BEGIN IN THE WILDERNESS AS AN INDIVIDUAL AND A CHURCH!

All of us have experienced wilderness times in our lives—the death of a child, a spouse, a parent, grandparent. Those have and continue to be tough times. Churches also experience these times as well in times of conflict and disagreement—and people leave the church. I’ve learned over the years as a pastor that these wilderness times help to refocus us and to ask again and again—what is God’s will for me-for us—in all of us. We sometime go through the pains and heartbreak—to bring us back to God—even as TFCCCH!

2. TWO: JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS THE ONLY ONE WHO LEADS US TO RESTORATION—TO SHALOM AND PEACE!

Jesus reminds us again and again, **“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me!** Jesus is our caring and loving Shepherd always present 24-7 in our lives!

Sharing stories

3.THREE: WE ARE TO PARTICIPATE AND CONTRIBUTE TO GOD’S PROMISES IN THIS TIME!

God’s promises are not all eschatological-as we wait patiently for the end of time. We are invited here and now to contribute to God’s promises by all the people of TFCCCH through our efforts and works and ministries of healing, comforting, helping—and to bring justice!

SENDING IN THE WORD OF GOD

So sisters and brothers—what kind of ***waiting*** are you and will you be doing in this Advent. Will we await for Christ’s return—and wait, and wait? Or can we spend our time, energy, wealth, and lives to make a difference right now—as individuals and as people of TFCCCH? Let us make a difference right now in the lives of our families and in the lives of all the people God has put all around us! God is continuing to tell the story of the Good News of Jesus I and through our words and actions and each of us will have hundred and one opportunities to contribute to that sacred story—to make it come alive in the people

around us and to help God keep God's promises in the here and now!

"Don't mess around. Stay awake. Seize the day. For this is the day that God has made, and I will rejoice and be glad in it!"

