

¹ Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the
field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

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.

-- Isaiah 40: 1-11

¹ The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—
³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

-- Mark 1:1-8

²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison.) ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

²⁷ To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less."

-- John 3:23-30

I grew up in a church culture where the "good news" wasn't really good news at all. Of course, back then, I never really thought that the gospel as I knew it could be seen as anything *but* good news. For better or worse (mostly for worse) I thought that being Christian meant quitting things I was taught were bad. Stop drinking? Well why shouldn't you? Stop smoking? Only bad people smoke. Stop cursing? Yes of course. Only pure words coming from pure thoughts, if you please. This was *all* good news—wasn't it? As far as we were concerned, giving the gospel to the world was a matter of pointing out how wrong everyone else was and to make everybody feel guilty for being that wrong. Comfort? That was for the lukewarm Christian, the huggers and hippies. You know, the ones we all knew Jesus would spit out on the last day.

Yet it's "comfort" that the voice of one in the desert cries out. "Comfort", not "don't do this, don't do that." Not "fire and brimstone and burning souls", but "comfort".

It seems odd that a man like John the Baptist preaches a word of comfort. There was nothing comfortable about him. What we know of him is that he was Jesus' cousin and a man who apparently liked bathing strangers between his meals of bugs and honey. And even if he wasn't crunching bugs and instead was eating carob beans as some commentators suggest, his diet was simple and poor, just like his clothing which was made out of rough camel hides. Now, far from making fun of John,

the people in the Roman province of Judea listened to him because if there was any man who could claim to have turned his back on the way of the world for simplicity, it was the man in animal skins with grasshopper legs stuck in his teeth. The people of Judea responded to John by getting baptized by the dozens, each of them hearing John and believing him. The word of God to them through the prophet John was that they had better turn their lives around and live justly with their neighbour before God¹. And what better way to commemorate this turn by symbolically washing away the old self. I wonder: did they take comfort in this washing?

At the beginning of the fortieth chapter in the book named after him, Isaiah starts speaking a series of oracles called the Book of Consolation, and at the beginning of this book within a book are these words: “*Comfort! Comfort!*” This is the first thing God wants his persecuted people to hear. “*Comfort, comfort!*” But did John—the one Isaiah says is the voice calling in the wilderness—preach a word of “comfort”? When we listen to the message that John the cousin of Jesus speaks, it doesn’t *sound* much like comfort. It sounds like “*get washed! Turn yourself around! Quit lying, quit stealing, quit bullying—because someone greater than me is coming.*” To the modern ear, this doesn’t sound very comforting at all—and to most North Americans, this is a blasphemy against the religion of the self because it sounds like more rules and regulations, proof positive that Christians really don’t believe in grace after all.

Yet it *is* comfort that John the Baptist announces, but like most things that come from God, it comes to us in a way we least expect.

“*Comfort, comfort my people*”, God says to Isaiah. “*They may have abandoned me, but my lovely little nation has suffered for it long enough. Speak to them and tell them that I will relent and hold them close once more. Comfort, comfort. I am coming soon.*”

¹ Luke 3:7-18

Eight hundred years after Isaiah, John the Baptist starts his ministry—the voice of one calling in the desert where God apparently likes to make himself known. First in the wanderings of Abraham, then in the wanderings of Israel, then through John’s ministry, and ultimately in the temptation of Jesus. It’s as though the vast nothingness of a desert is the only way we start attending to our dependence on God. When we’re in the wilderness and unsure of where our next meal is coming from, where we might find shelter, and how long we can go for without water, that’s when we’re most vulnerable—and that’s when we’re most willing to listen. It’s in the moments when we feel as though we’re in a desert of our own that we come to rely not on our own strength and provision, but on God’s.

Scripture doesn’t tell us that John lived in the desert, but it compares John to that voice shouting out from the desert, the voice of God that cuts through our distractions and calls the people back to worship. If you’ve ever been to the desert or deep wilderness, one of the first things you might notice is how *quiet* it is. When a voice calls out in the desert, you *listen*. And John, the voice of God cries out “*prepare the way for the LORD.*”

Yet for a God who guides his people with a cloud by day and fire by night; and for a God who makes springs of water burst up out of the rock and sand, why—and how—are we to make a way for the God who makes a way for us?

Though the story of John the Baptist is repeated in three of four of the gospels, Mark does something interesting when he introduces John to the world: he combines a fragment from the book of Malachi² with the verses we have just read from Isaiah. This doesn’t sound very significant until we realize that the prophetic book of Malachi is about the purification of worship in Israel. At the time of Malachi, the priests who were supposed to guide Israel in worship were corrupt, and Israel had

² Malachi 3:1

forgotten what it meant to be God's people as a result. The messenger in Malachi is the one who prepares Israel to re-learn what it means to worship the living God and remember their identity as God's chosen. So when Mark combines John the Baptist with Malachi's messenger, what he's saying is that John is the one who is preparing the people to worship God again.

John's sole mission in life isn't to get disciples for himself—though he has some. It isn't to get rich or famous, even though many people admired him. John's purpose in life was to point to someone *else*, to the one coming after him whose "sandals he was unworthy to tie." And if you're asking now how God speaks comfort to his people through a wild man in camel skins, it's not that John himself speaks nicely to the people, it's that God's Word of comfort becomes *flesh*. You see, God was never content with sending messengers while he himself remained far off. He tried that with the prophets, and the world rejected all of those who spoke in place of God. So, doing what he knew he ultimately had to do to get the world's attention, God comes to us himself. This is the compassion of God, not just his sadness for the evil of the world, but that he willingly becomes *one of us* and suffers *with* us.

Have you ever had a friend who's going through such a rough time that you wish you could just feel their pain for them? That somehow you could reach in and take away the reason they weep even if that meant you had to weep yourself? I can't count how many times I've sat across from people who are crying their guts out and the one thing I find myself wanting to do is to feel their pain with them, to take it away and make it better even if it means that I'll feel worse in the process. But I can't do that. I can feel bad for the other person's pain and anguish. I can feel sympathy for their ordeals and trials. But I can't *become* them, no matter how hard I try—and I certainly can't take away their pain. But here's good news: God can, and God does. John speaks words of comfort not just because he's announcing God's arrival on the scene, but because he's announcing that instead of

standing to one side and wringing his hands and saying “*oh dear, oh dear*”, God is becoming one of us and taking away all that ultimately will kill us. Our sin. Our sorrow. Our despair. This is the good news I missed out on when I was younger.

Strangely enough, the people believe that John is a prophet from God³ even though the crazy bug-eating man doesn't do any miracles. He doesn't have much more to help him prepare the way for God-in-the-flesh than a few simple words. It's enough to drive preachers nuts with the way John gets his hearers to respond to the call to turn their lives around, be washed, and be forgiven. Perhaps this is a word for us today—that maybe in order to prepare the way and make room for God to come, we don't need lasers and rock bands or dog and pony shows. What we need—what we have *always* needed—is simply to be willing to let God use what we have. This isn't because God is some egomaniac who can't stand anyone else hogging the limelight with him, it's because when we commit everything we have to showing who God is (especially if we have very little) God takes and multiplies it beyond our wildest dreams.

It takes a certain kind of person to keep pointing away from herself and towards the comfort of God-in-the-flesh. I don't think preparing the way of the Lord means we need to hammer ourselves down into the dirt and call ourselves worms. Instead, a better way may be to take ourselves lightly, to recognize we are all cracked pots carrying treasures of great worth, and to let our cracks be the things that let the light of that treasure shine into the dark. A generation ago the popular thing to do was to go traveling so as to “find ourselves.” And many still think that the further you go away from home the more at home you'll be in your own skin. Yet the gospel of Christ stands against this whole idea of “finding ourselves” because Jesus says with his own lips “*whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.*”⁴ Christians aren't to be in the business of beating themselves up, nor are they to be

³ Matt 14:5, 21:26

⁴ Matt 10:39

obsessed with their self-actualization. A right view of ourselves begins with the fact that even though we are deeply flawed, we are also the deeply beloved of God. It's when we see ourselves clearly that we can then prepare room for God to be shown through our lives.

Later, when John is asked about the upstart Jesus, John replies "*he must become greater, I must become less.*"⁵ Only thing is, that's not all he says, because the Greek word for "greater" here actually means "growing up"⁶. What John's really saying is "*Jesus is all grown up now. My time of preparation is finished. Now is when the Comfort of God-in-the-flesh will go after his little lambs and hold them close.*" John recognizes how Jesus is mature and ready, and so is more than content to fade while the light of his cousin grows brighter and brighter. It's ironic, but as John recognizes the grown-upness of Jesus, he doesn't regress. He grows up himself.

- 1.) How can we prepare ourselves to receive God?
- 2.) How can we make ways for the glory of God to be revealed?
- 3.) What is "Christian maturity"?

⁵ John 3:30

⁶ "he must become greater, I must become less" → "auxanein" → "to grow up" "elattousthai" → "become inferior"