

St. Paul's Congregational Church
December 10, 2017; Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Once upon a time, a man and his family were driving along on a hot, steamy Carolina afternoon when they passed an orchard of “pick your own” peaches. The man thought, “I doubt that any bargain peaches would be good enough to take us out of this comfortable, air conditioned car into that heat to pick those peaches.” But they did pull over, paid their money, and selected a basket to fill with fresh, ripe South Carolina peaches.

As they set off into the orchard, an old man who was tending the orchard said, “If you want the best fruit, go deeper into the orchard. The peaches here are picked over, but deeper in, you’ll find the best fruit.” So the family walked further in, decided they’d gone far enough – they set the basket down – but they heard the old man yell, “Go deeper!”

So they picked up the basket and went a little further in but when they started to pick, the man said again, “No, go even deeper...the best fruit is even farther in.” So, once again, they picked up their basket, walked a little further, thinking they were surely deep enough into the orchard, and as they finally felt like they just couldn’t go any further, they heard him again. “Go on! Go deeper.”

I’m sure they sighed a little but they kept walking, right into the very midst of the orchard – and they found the old man was right. The finest, sweetest, plumpest peaches were untouched and waiting right there for them.

You know, maybe this season of Advent invites us to look at our lives and ask the same question: have I gone deep enough? Am I only skimming the surface, staying on the edges of real living? Maybe that’s what the prophet Isaiah is telling us – maybe that’s what John the Baptist is telling us – go deeper! Don’t settle for second best – if we really want “in on” the Christmas story, go deeper. Go deeper still.

It’s the second Sunday of Advent – and we’re well into the preparations for Christmas – at least some are. I’m not, I confess. There’s gift shopping to be done, maybe we’re starting our traditional holiday baking, the Christmas parties have begun, we’re thinking about getting our tree or maybe it’s already up. Our decorations here in the sanctuary are growing, more beautiful every week – Christmas songs and carols are playing. The Christmas specials on TV are constant. Right here our choir is rehearsing for the advent services and Christmas Eve worship – there’s a lot going on here to prepare for the birth of Jesus.

As we drove home Friday night from the Paper Mill production of “Annie” – the song “The Sun will come up Tomorrow” kept running through my head – and it really did help draw me out of my immersion in the hard news of last week – the chaos in our government, North Korea, violence yet again in the Mideast, on our streets – but the worst was the news of the death of a dear, sweet man from Glen Ridge – a gentle, soft spoken man, who died suddenly when he fell 50 feet from a bridge in town. It was a tough week - but the break from the routine on Friday night helped. On the way home I

so enjoyed seeing the Christmas lights on houses – on that lovely crisp, clear night, the lights of New York in the distance were breathtaking too – the beauty of the night with the lights near and far was just spectacular. All the tiredness, the sadness, the worry, the frustration I'd been feeling faded away as I enjoyed the light show around me. But then I came down the mountain in West Orange and the reality began to hit again.

Don't we all want in some way to be in on the expectant, joyful, hopeful feelings of this season. But life, reality, so often intrudes.

The advent/Christmas season is a strange time of year for us, isn't it. A time when, as we prepare for the coming of the Son of God, we often feel down, disappointed, and anxious. Our highs are higher, our lows are lower. It's a time when instead of feeling joy we feel despair. A time when instead of rejoicing, we fret and worry. A time when instead of feeling hope, peace, joy, love, we are overrun with scheduling nightmares – so much to do that we miss the coming of the Light.

In our own church family all this is true, isn't it – there are those who are sick. Their families, their friends, struggle so, watching, praying, waiting. Members of our own families suffer as we watch. Relationships are strained in some families – and that brings such pain.

Some members of our church family are mourning – mourning the loss of a family member or friend, mourning the anniversary of the death of someone dear. The light seems dim for them these days.

And all of us are bombarded with bad news every time we turn on the TV, listen to the radio, read the papers: war rages, we read of people who are hurting in our wider community: children who are or have been victims of terrible abuse, families who are stuck in darkest poverty, and many of us get frustrated with governmental systems unable and perhaps even unwilling to help them find their way out.

We can get caught up, overwhelmed in the doom and gloom, can't we. Well, maybe we need to go a little deeper.

Advent is such a season of contrast. And we see that contrast in our scripture readings this morning: from the gentle words of comfort from Isaiah to the sharp warnings of John the Baptist. We love to hear and take in Isaiah's words: Comfort, O comfort, my people, says the Lord. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. 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, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Then there's the message of John the Baptist: his image is very different from the images Isaiah calls to mind. Even in his own time John was strange – imagine how he must have looked with the camel's hair dress, belted with leather – and he ate locusts and honey. And even more, his very message is anything but comforting – he speaks of repentance. He speaks of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. It is time to get ready for the one greater than himself who is coming – he's the prophet, not the fulfillment. There's no soft comfort here – there is no ringing of joy and peace. It is time to turn around. It is time to be open to the new, the unfamiliar. It's no time to rest and rejoice in safety, in comfort. John the Baptist pulls us back, pulls us out of our comfort zone, and tells us that we must repent.

Maybe that's another message of Advent – putting the grace and mercy so loud and clear in the Isaiah passage against the harshness of John the Baptist. We'd sure rather skip over that harshness, wouldn't we. We'd rather concentrate on the grace and mercy, the softness of Christmas, the sentimentality of Christmas. But to get there, we have to go through the tough texts of Advent.

Advent can be a time of harshness – a time when the heart hurts – our scripture this morning attests to that – it can also be a time of wondrous promise, wondrous joy, wondrous peace. But we have to go through the wilderness to get there. For Advent also holds the promise – that God is with us – Emmanuel is to be born again and again and again in us. I think we make a mistake, I think we are not true to our calling, I think we're wrong if we don't consider both the highs and lows of Advent. Because the whole point of Advent is to connect with the longing, the waiting, the discomfort, the pain and fear – because it's then that the love and faithfulness can meet, the righteousness and peace can emerge.

Maybe Advent is God calling us to go deeper. Maybe we have to let ourselves be a little more vulnerable. Maybe we have to face our own wilderness places, those things that hold us captive – in order to get to a place of peace and a deep joy that truly is lasting. Maybe the thing about Advent is this: it's a time of allowing ourselves to be transformed – for life changing transformation. It's a time to recognize anew that yearning deep within us to have a deeper relationship with the God who created us, protects us, loves us, wants the best for us – and who will walk with us in all that vulnerability. And then act on it!

A young man appeared at the Glen Ridge Church office one day and asked to see the pastor. People often stop in for food or financial help, especially at this time of year - that's not so unusual. But when I met him, something was very different here. Yes – he asked for some food and I could give him that from the grocery cart in the narthex– but it wasn't just cereal or peanut butter and jelly that he was looking for. There was something else on his heart. So we sat down – it was quiet as he seemed to be thinking, struggling. I asked him if he'd like to go into the sanctuary for a few minutes. He quickly stood up – oh yes - and we went in and sat in one of the pews. He was quiet for a little while and then his painful story came out. As I listened to him I heard the words of Isaiah ringing in my head – Comfort, O comfort my people.

And this week, a young woman came here on her lunch hour – all she wanted was to go into the sanctuary to pray – was that ok? Of course it was!

Advent is about allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and opening ourselves to the rebirth of hope in our lives. Advent is about being transformed – about sharing our deepest selves with the God who waits for us always and who will always welcome us home. I had no answers for this young man's why questions – but I was honored to share and witness his vulnerability, his courage in going so deep. When he left a little while later, he was smiling, he stood straighter, and I could see the dawn of new hope in his eyes. His wilderness was a little less frightening.

And I never did hear the young woman's story but when she left, she too stood straighter, she was smiling – she'd found some hope, some peace, in her time with God in our sanctuary.

God is good. All the time. God is good. Comfort, O comfort my people.

I've been thinking too how we are blessed lately by the presence of visitors, newcomers, both returning and long standing members to our worship. These our brothers and sisters in Christ come for lots of reasons - some are looking for a community where they can introduce their children to church school. Others have been away from church a while for a variety of reasons. Still others are looking to find or re-find a faith that will sustain them through the highs and lows of life. We need each other on this faith journey. We have much to offer each other – all of us – and perhaps this season of Advent with the harsh words of John and the profound comfort of Isaiah opens us in new ways, both as individuals and as church.

I like to knit – I especially enjoy making afghans – lots of stitches on them, and they have to be long enough that you can really wrap yourself in them. At the end of the project, you “bind off” the stitches – one at a time – it seems to take forever, this process. But then slowly, or maybe it's all of a sudden, there's only one stitch left – when it is bound off, the project is finished. Now it's time to “cast on” stitches for another project. It seems to me that this is a description of Advent too – a time to bind off, a time to cast on – a time for turning around – a time for starting something new. A time to go a little deeper and perhaps let go of what is familiar and comfortable, a time to be ready for, open to, something new. Oh yes, it can be an anxious time for us – but here's where the message, the promise, of Isaiah can ring loud and strong for us – then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

In the midst of the harshness of Advent there is also the promise of grace and mercy of Advent. The road to Christmas leads through the wilderness – if we choose to take that road and I pray we will. Because on the other side of the wilderness is the promise, the joy, we have in the words of Isaiah. And of course, this is not a one time event, is it. Advent comes upon us every year to stop us short, we hear the words of John the Baptist every year to challenge us, and we hear the words every year of the promise of that Baby born in the manger. God keeps calling us – God keeps calling us out of our comfort zones into new life, into new relationship with God and with each other. May we go deeper, may we be open to the transformation Advent offers. May we not be afraid to respond. May we each answer God's call with all that we are and with all that we have. May we know the peace that passes all understanding – and may we share that peace with all we meet. Amen.