

“A Song of Preparation”
Isaiah 40:1-5
Matt. 3:1-3; Luke 3:1-6
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, December 1, 2019

On Monday and Tuesday evenings in the fall Nancy and I enjoy watching the Voice on TV at the end of our day. / I guess I should say we enjoy LISTENING to it!

The show has run for almost 10 years - - and is a competition. / Singers compete for the title, and they do that by singing. / The well known country music singer Blake Shelton is one of the coaches. / The contestants are NOT well known singers. / But most of them are hoping to make it big. / And the songs they sing - - are NOT originals.

So many of the songs are songs we have heard before. / It's what is called, “covering” a song. / The challenge is to “cover” a well known song by another artist - - and do it well. / How do you do that?

Do you try to imitate the famous version nearly identically?

Or do you do it in your own unique and original and different way?

The answer is - - both and neither.

To cover a song well - - it has to be recognizably the song.

And there are certain beloved parts - - you might not want to mess with.

BUT - - to do it really well - - you have to somehow make the song your own too.

I think we can appreciate this challenge a little more in the Christmas season. / Christmas carols are on the radio - - and they are familiar. / And yet there are dozens of versions of these well known carols. / Some of my favorites are Pink Martini's version of “Do You Hear What I Hear?”. / And Sarah McLaughlan singing with Barenaked Ladies on “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen”.

So interesting covers of well known songs are what I'm talking about.

The first three chapters of the gospels are full of covers.

Here's what I mean:

Well known songs from the Old Testament are revised and used by the New Testament - - to tell the story of Jesus. / Jesus IS a kind of "cover" of ancient Old Testament expectations about the Messiah. / And the gospels refer to these Old Testament images. / In fact - - there are ancient songs that get re-sung.

But these Biblical "songs" are more like poems.

They are called songs by commentators and some may have been set to music.

The songs are found on the lips of several characters who we meet along the Advent and Christmas way in the Bible. This year during the season of Advent, my sermons will focus on these Biblical Songs of Christmas. Starting today and for the next four weeks, we will look at one example a week.

In the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah has long been connected to Christmas by followers of Jesus, and Isaiah's song about the wilderness is part of how we prepare for the coming of Christmas. We will look more at that in a moment this morning.

Then next week, it's Mary's song. / Mary the mother of Jesus has probably the most famous biblical song of Christmas, sometimes called the "Magnificat". And YET - - her song is very similar to a much more ancient Old Testament song of Hannah.

In fact - - one of the FEW things the gospel stories of Jesus birth from Luke and Matthew have in common - - is a reference to Isaiah. / Both of these gospels refer to Isaiah's prophecy of "Emmanuel". / The second chapter of Luke and the first chapter of Matthew both refer to Isaiah 7, verse 14.

Then in the THIRD chapter of both Matthew and Luke - - when the gospels are describing John the Baptist - - they BOTH refer to the same passage of Isaiah - - the reading for this morning.

In Isaiah chapter 40 is a description of one crying in the wilderness.

And it also refers to comfort because of the end of warfare and sin.

A way in the wilderness, and comfort.

Two parts of an Old Testament song or poem - - from Isaiah.

A well known song - - to the Hebrews of ancient Israel.

A well known song to Jesus' early followers.

A well known Old Testament song - - covered - - by both gospels.

Luke and Matthew both - - cover Isaiah's song.

AND - Matthew and Luke are hoping to win MORE than the title, "The Voice"! They are hoping to win the hearts of those listeners who might follow Jesus. This is a revamp of something deep in the hearts of the Jewish people. / Early followers of Jesus LOVED this song from Isaiah chapter 40. / It had comforted them - - during one of the most challenging times of their history.

So let's look more closely at the words - - at the heart of this song from Isaiah.

"Wilderness" - - and - - "comfort".

These TWO ideas are at the heart of Isaiah's song.

The first idea Isaiah sings about is comfort. / But one of the really interesting questions about his song is: "WHO - - is doing the comforting?".

The word in Hebrew is in the imperative. / It is a command.

Isaiah is not himself OFFERING comfort - - Isaiah is RECOMMENDING that someone else comfort. / “Comfort my people” means: “Hey you - - would you please - - comfort my people”.

So then - - WHO is Isaiah talking to?

God?

Is this a request made to God?

Maybe - - except that it is ALSO - - PLURAL!

Mostly Hebrews were unique in thinking of ONE God.

However - - there is a very ancient idea - - of a heavenly assembly.

In the ancient Near East in the time of Isaiah - - hundreds of years before Jesus - - there was this widespread idea of a heavenly assembly - - of angelic or godly beings - - who watched over people. / And the prophet Isaiah picks up THAT ancient idea - - from Babylonian religion - - and covers it. / But with some important DIFFERENCES:

For Isaiah - - this heavenly assembly is NOT a group of Gods.

NOW - - because of how Hebrews understood God - - the assembly is all subject TO the ONE God - - YAHWEH. / This is basically - - an assembly of ANGELS.

So according to Isaiah - - GOD is saying to the angels - - who are God’s messengers: “Please - - comfort my people”

This comfort is NOT about offering simple human condolences.

This is NOT “thoughts and prayers”...

This is DIVINE comfort.

This is comfort from BEYOND human comprehension.

And it does NOT diminish God - - it is FROM God.

The OTHER ancient idea that Isaiah changes up is the idea of a PROCESSION.

Isaiah says, “make a way in the wilderness”

A procession - - through the desert - - of challenges and disappointments. .

Well - - more than 1000 years before Jesus - - there was something called the “Enuma Elish” which referred to the Babylonian god Marduk being processed around in a kind of chair or throne. It read: “They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it.”

This procession - - is a weight on the shoulders of the people.

This ancient god - - is carried by the people - - in procession.

But Isaiah - - sings a different song.

For the Hebrew God Yahweh - - GOD bears US up!

God leads the procession and makes a way in the wilderness.

For US!

This all comes at a time of rebuilding for Israel.

They had returned from exile and were devastated by the time in captivity. /

They hoped to rebuild the temple out of rubble. / But Isaiah does NOT offer a detailed blueprint of a new temple. / This is not a description of a detailed plan to rebuild or renew Israel. / This is not ADVICE - - about how to make a fresh start.

This is about restoring a RELATIONSHIP.

To make a fresh start - - the RELATIONSHIP comes before the DETAILS.

Restore the relationship of comfort and blessing.

Renew a connection with GOD.

Follow the procession out of the wilderness.

Receive the comfort of God’s angels.

THEN - - - after the relationship has healed - - - the details will sort out.

I have to think - - as I reflect on this - - that PART of what was comforting - -
must have been a return to a kind of MUNDANE - - everyday - - sense of normal.

Normally - - normal can seem - - boring.

But after a CRISIS - - BORING - - can seem GREAT!

What would it be like - - to find comfort in the everyday?

A return to - - comforting - - everyday things.

Renewing routines. / Trusting relationships... What would that be like?

As a way of reflecting on that question - - I'll close today with a reading called:

“The Music One Looks Back On”, by Stephen Dobyns.

In early autumn there's a CONCERTO.

It's possible when there's a guest in the house...

And the guest is taking a shower...

And the HOST is washing up from the night before.

With each TURN of the TAP in the kitchen,

the water temperature increases or drops upstairs

and the guest responds with little groans - -

Cold water for low notes, hot water for high.

Then let's say the night was particularly frosty

and now the radiators are knocking.

Knocking and filling the house with warmth.

And the children rush outside in the leaves before breakfast.

They call to the Irish setter whose name is Cleveland.

Standing at the sink, the host HUMS to himself
 as he thinks of the eggs he'll soon fry up,
 while already there's the crackle of bacon.

The mild groans of the guest, the radiator's percussion,
 the children's high voices, the barking dog, combine...
 into this autumn - - CONCERTO - -

A concerto of which not one of the musicians - - is aware,
 as they drift toward breakfast.

And then a leisurely walk through the fields near the house - -

Two friends who haven't seen each other for over a year.

Much later they will remember only the color,

Golden yellow, and the sound of their feet, scuffling the leaves.

A day without rancor or angry words.

The sort of day that builds a life,

becoming a soft place to look back on.

And geese - - flying south for the winter.

AS THIS Advent season begins, may we all take the opportunity to create soft
 places to look back on. / Days without rancor or angry words.

May we receive the comfort from God's angels.

And may that make a way - - in our wilderness...