

I

Some years ago a military airplane crashed at Sonderstrom Air Force Base in Greenland. Twenty-two people were killed. The runway and the nearby fields were strewn with bodies. It was a tragic and horrible moment. There was only one chaplain on the base at the time... and the entire burden was laid on him to bring comfort and the Word of Christ to a shocked community staggered by the horrendous accident. But there was little time to mourn that day. The grisly task of gathering up and identifying the bodies needed to be done.

And so, the chaplain, along with a young lieutenant who had been assigned the duties of a mortuary officer and a group of volunteers went about the awful business of picking up the mutilated bodies and trying to identify the dead, so that their families and loved ones back home could be notified. It was a heart-breaking and exhausting task, but it had to be done. The people worked in shocked silence well into the night until they almost dropped from fatigue. When every last remnant of death had been picked up, they each went silently to their individual rooms.

That night, after midnight, there was a knock on the chaplain's door. Outside stood the young lieutenant, the Mortuary Officer. He said nothing. He just stood there and wept. After some moments, the young lieutenant spoke through his tears and he said to the chaplain, "As we were picking up the bodies today, I realized something. I realized that the only other people out there with us were the people who go to church here. I have always been an unbeliever, and I used to ridicule these same people who were out there with us. Yet they are the only persons who would, or perhaps could, do what we had to do today. It must have been their Christian spirit that could help them see beyond the horror to the hope."

That tragic day turned around the life of that young lieutenant. As he had admitted, he had never been religious, had seldom gone to church except for weddings and funerals, but from that time on he was a new man. Christ was born in his heart. From that time forward, he took an active part in the Christian ministry of that base. Then he did an unheard thing – he extended his tour of duty in Greenland for an extra year. He was the first person in the history of that base to do that. He did it because he wanted to be able to tell others the story of how the power of the Christian Hope had changed his life.

If you want to give your loved ones a great Christmas present this year, give them the gift of Christian Hope. On page after page of the New Testament we find it: the Good News that God will win, that nothing can defeat Him; that ultimately God and goodness will have the victory and that when we put our hope in Him, nothing, not even death, can separate us from His watchful care and His love and His triumph. Once each year, Christmas comes along to renew our hope and to remind us that the darkness of this world cannot overcome the light of the world.

Our lesson for today from Isaiah 40 begins like this: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . .”

It’s been said that the task of a prophet is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Prophets like Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were quite adept at afflicting the comfortable. Amos, particularly, was harsh in chastising the children of Israel because of their treatment of the poor as well as their other sins. In chapter 3 he explains why:

“Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the Lord has spoken against you—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: ‘You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins . . .’”

That’s interesting, don’t you think? It is because God chose Israel to be His people that it is necessary for God to punish Israel when they go astray.

From time to time, I hear someone say that God has chosen America and that is the reason we are so blessed materially. Be careful when you say that. Remember what the Master said, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b). It was because God had chosen Israel that He expected so much out of her. And it was because God chose Israel that He punished her for her sins. That was the teaching of the prophets.

Fortunately, we live on the other side of the cross. Christ has borne our sins on himself. As the psalmist said, “he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:10-12).

God does not punish us for our sins. Still, it would profit us to heed the word of the prophets. If we are in Christ, the punishment for our transgressions has been taken away from us. However, that does not mean we are home free. If you drive out of the parking lot at 90 miles an hour, run red lights, drive recklessly in every way possible—even if you escape the judgment of law enforcement—there is the judgment of the laws of physics that says that if you take a turn too fast in a car there is a price to pay. There is a certain amount of pain involved in crashing an automobile into an immovable object like a large oak tree or, for that matter, another car. God’s not punishing you for this reckless act; the laws of nature are punishment enough.

God does not punish us for our sins. He only weeps when we bring punishment on ourselves by our misdeeds. The prophets of the Old Testament were simply warning the people where they were headed if they continually ignored God’s law.

Someone has likened it to two young men canoeing down the river toward Niagara Falls. Although the water was relatively calm, they were approaching the area where the water began to pick up speed as it headed for the falls. A man on the shore, sensing the danger, called out, “Young men, you’re getting too close to the rapids!”

But the young men, who heard the warning, did not heed it. Instead they went on laughing and joking, paying no attention to the danger.

On the shore, the man watching began to run and shouted in desperation, “Turn around! You’re getting too close to the rapids!”

Still the young men did not heed his warning. Faster and faster ran the current until the canoe was trapped in the rapids. The young men began to panic. With all the power at their command they tried to turn the canoe around, but it was too late. Over the falls they went—all because they refused to heed the voice of warning. (2)

The prophets were not simply “spoil sports,” as many of us would like to imagine them, trying to keep people from having too much fun. Rather they were voices of warning that doing wrong can bring disaster for us and often for people we love. Sometimes, if we are fortunate, a friend will serve as a voice of warning.

Sometimes the prophets were quite strident with their warnings, but, every once in a while, the prophets were capable of striking a gentle chord as well. None more so than the prophet Isaiah. And our text for today contains some of the most beautiful words in the scriptures:

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.”

Here is the setting for this passage: The Babylonian army had invaded the land. Many of the leading citizens have been taken away to exile in Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. The holy city lay in ruins. The people were in shock. Those carried away to exile had the extra burden of being displaced from their home, the Promised Land. As the psalmist cried out during this time of exile: “By the waters of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” (Psalm 137:1)

That’s the situation that the prophet Isaiah is addressing. But rather than issuing any more words of warning, he becomes a herald of hope. “Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . .” The Lord has not forgotten His people. Indeed, God Himself will soon be coming to them which is why we read this for Advent.

This is one of the many messianic prophecies of Isaiah. Isaiah is telling the people that God will not leave them desolate—just as He will not leave us desolate. As he says in chapter 7, verse 40, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel” which means “God is with us.” God with us. Are there any words in scripture more beautiful than these: God with us.

“Do you people remember the story about Robinson Crusoe? “Robinson Crusoe was in a shipwreck. He was all alone, stranded on an island. He wandered around that island

for days, weeks, months and he knew he was alone. But one day, he noticed a footprint in the sand and that footprint was not his own. Immediately, Robinson Crusoe knew instantly that he was not alone. Someone else was on that island." Someone else was with him.

That was the message of Isaiah to the people of Israel. Immanuel was coming. God had not forgotten them. They were not alone.

In one of his books, evangelist Billy Graham told about a time in his life when he was going through a dark period. He said he prayed long and earnestly, but there was no answer. He said he felt as though God was indifferent and that he was all alone with his problem. It was what some would call "a dark night of the soul."

Billy Graham wrote his mother about the experience. He said he would never forget her reply: "Son," she said, "There are many times when God withdraws to test your faith. He wants you to trust Him in the darkness. Now, Son, reach up by faith in the fog and you will find that His hand will be there."

"Relieved," Graham said, "I knelt by my bed and experienced an overwhelming sense of God's presence." (4)

That is the greatest source of comfort in this world. I know, there are many things that are offered as sources of comfort in the world today. We have comfort food. Who said chocolate? One man said that in his family growing up, meatloaf was their comfort food. Well . . . different strokes for different folks.

In 1995, there was a young man in Britain who excelled in taking examinations. His name was Francis Thomason. Francis gave credit to his warm slippers when explaining how he had managed to pass so many examinations and gain a university degree. "It is important to have comfortable feet," he said. (5)

Lots of things bring comfort. Linus, in the *Peanuts* cartoon, had his blanket for comfort. Remember that? He took it with him everywhere he went.

There are times when we need someone to comfort us.

But later in this chapter Isaiah tells us the real source of comfort and that, of course, is God: "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!'" Then he adds these tender words, "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." Now that's comfort—comfort that only God can give.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . ." There's only one place where lasting comfort can be found—in the arms of the one who as a babe laid his head in the manger of Bethlehem.

1. Adapted from a sermon by Randy L. Hyde, <http://www.phbclr.com/wp-content/uploads/07.31.11.pdf>.

2. Adapted from David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, p. 512.

4. *Hope for the Troubled Heart* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), p. 143.

5. William Hartston, *The Encyclopedia of Useless Information* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2007), p. 320.

II King Duncan

After some last-minute Christmas shopping, a woman was rushing her grandchildren into the car. It was then that four-year-old Jason said, "Grandma, Susie has something in her pocket." He then proceeded to reach into Susie's pocket and pulled out a new red barrette.

Though she was tired, this grandmother knew it was important for Susie to put the item back where she had found it. They did just that. Then they headed to the grocery store. Later at the grocery store checkout, the clerk asked, "Have you kids been good so Santa will come?"

"I've been very good," replied Jason, "but my sister just robbed a store." (1)

I hope all our adults are being good. After all, Santa is watching.

It is interesting how each of the Gospels tells about the coming of Christ in a different way.

Matthew prepares us for this wondrous story by giving us a list of Jesus' ancestors back through the reign of King David, all the way back to Adam. Then he tells us about Mary and Joseph and the announcement by an angel that Mary will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit. This, says the angel, is to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah (7:14), "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). Then Matthew moves to Jesus' birth and the story of the star in the heavens that leads the magi to the house where the young child lay.

Luke tells the story in a slightly different way. Luke begins with an angel announcing to Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents, that a son will be born to them in their advanced age. Then Luke tells about the angel's announcement to Mary that she will bear a child. Then he tells about a visit Mary makes to Elizabeth's home where Mary delivers her beautiful hymn of praise which the church has termed the Magnificat. Then Luke tells about Christ's birth with the angels praising God in the heavens and the shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem to worship the newborn babe.

The Gospel of John, written much later than the other Gospels, dispenses with the genealogies and the birth narratives altogether. Instead John goes back all the way to the beginning of time to let us know that Christ was present at creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it . . ." Then John moves almost immediately to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist.

And then there is the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel to be recorded. It is thought that Mark was fearful that those who were witnesses to the coming of Christ would die before anyone prepared a written testimony to Christ's life. So Mark wrote in a hurry, giving us a bare-bones account of Christ's life, death and resurrection. So there are no shepherds in Mark's account, no magi. Neither are there theological reflections as in John. However, like John, Mark begins with Jesus' baptism. Mark's Gospel begins like this: The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

And so John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem go out to him. Confessing their sins, they are baptized by him in the Jordan River. John was a strange looking spokesman for God. He wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

So, almost immediately, Mark moves to the gist of the Gospel, Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist with the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. And a voice coming from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Our introduction to the coming of Christ in Mark's Gospel isn't angels singing in the heavens or a bright star moving toward Bethlehem. Instead, it is John the Baptist out in the wilderness. John has an announcement to make.

There is a story about a church one Sunday morning in Charlotte, N. C. It came time for the sermon. The preacher was just about to open his mouth and begin when suddenly a man in the balcony a stranger, a man nobody knew stood up and said in a loud clear voice, "I have a word from the Lord." Heads swiveled around. Whatever this word from the Lord was, no one ever got to hear it because "two bouncers disguised as ushers bounded like gazelles up the balcony stairway and muscled him out of the sanctuary and into the street." (2) It was a Sunday morning to remember.

I'm not surprised the ushers hustled this man out. Our first thought is that he was a nut. But what if he did have a word from God? That's possible, isn't it? What if his message was authentic? We will never know, because the ushers were in a hurry to keep him from disrupting worship. That's kind of scary if you think about it. A person might have a genuine message from God and we might dismiss him as a nut, a radical, a trouble maker. John the Baptist was someone with a genuine announcement from God.

Usually announcements in church are kind of boring, aren't they? Unless, of course, they get mangled. One pastor chuckled over a typo that changed the meaning of an announcement that appeared in his church bulletin: "Choir rehearsal this afternoon at

3:30. Everyone who wishes to sin in the choir must come to practice.” I seriously doubt there is more sinning in the choir than anywhere else. And they certainly don’t need practice. You have to be careful about announcements though. Or “Weight Watchers going to the basement meeting room should use the large double doors in the back of the Church.”

At one small college in the Northeast, snow had been coming down steadily for hours when an announcement came over the intercom: “Will the students who are parked on College Drive please move their cars so that we may begin plowing?”

Twenty minutes later there was another announcement: “Plowing has been completed. The six hundred and twenty-seven students who went to move 26 cars can return to class now.” (3)

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness. He is strangely dressed. He is contending that he has a word from God. He has an announcement that the world needs to hear. This is important for us to see. The Christian faith is not a truth that someone has discovered or an idea that someone has carefully thought out. Christian faith is an announcement, it is a proclamation. It is an act of revelation. The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement! It is an announcement of God’s wondrous love.

An angel makes an announcement to Elizabeth and Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a child even at their advanced age. An angel makes an announcement to Mary and then confirms it to Joseph that she will bear a child whose name will be Emmanuel. Later John the Baptist will make an announcement to the people of Israel. And what is that announcement that John makes? “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is the heart of Advent and Christmas. We love all the preparations for Christmas: lights, music, parties, family coming in, manger scenes, and all the other wonderful elements of this season of the year. But none of it means anything without this announcement by John of the coming Messiah: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John was announcing the coming of the Messiah.

Really, on the surface, John’s announcement doesn’t sound all that dramatic. Basically all he says is that this Messiah is someone very special, someone much more worthy than John himself. It is clear that even John could not grasp the full meaning of his announcement. It took more sophisticated theologians to see that this Messiah was not just a messenger of God, but was God Himself in human form. He was the Word made flesh. Isaiah prophesied this very thing hundreds of years before Christ’s birth. He wrote in our lesson for today, “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!'" (v. 9).

John's announcement was greater than even he could realize. He was introducing to the world the incarnate God.

It's like a story that theologian Dale Bruner tells about a little boy named Gabriel Hurles. In January 2009 Gabriel turned six years old. Gabriel was so focused on eating his birthday cake, that he hardly noticed a giant package in the corner of the room. When another child pointed out the large gift, Gabriel ran over and began to tear off the wrapping. When the package was open, Gabriel discovered it wasn't a bicycle or any of the other items a six-year-old would dream about for Christmas. Rather, it was Gabriel's dad, Army Specialist Casey Hurles, home on leave from the war in Iraq. Gabriel and his father had been apart for seven months, so when Casey learned his leave would coincide with his son's birthday, he hatched a plan to offer Gabriel an amazing surprise. He had himself wrapped up as the ultimate birthday gift for his child. (4)

In essence, that's what God did for us that first Christmas. He offered Himself as an amazing surprise. He wrapped Himself up in the form of a tiny baby. Everything we know about God, we learn from his son, Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh.

Origen, in the third century, offered a different kind of analogy. He told of a village with a huge statue. This statue was so immense you couldn't see exactly what it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone miniaturized the statue so one could see the person it honored. Origen said, "That is what God did in his Son."

In Colossians 1 Paul tells us Christ is the self-miniaturization of God, the visible icon or image of the invisible God. In Christ we have God in a comprehensible way. In Christ we have God's own personal and definitive visit to the planet. (5)

Without even realizing the full scope of his message, John announced that God Himself had come to this world. But there is a second facet to John's announcement. John also announced that another baptism was coming, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." You and I take great comfort in our baptism. To say that we are baptized into the Christian faith is one of the most important things that can ever happen to us. It is a sign that we have joined God's family.

I love the way one little girl described it. Before I give you that description, however, you need to know that out on the cattle ranches of the West the unbranded calves that roam at large are known as "mavericks." They are claimed by the man who is first to get his brand on them at the annual round up. A little Western girl had been baptized one Sunday by a local minister. Her schoolmates questioned her the next day as to the meaning of the ceremony. "Well," she said, "I will just tell you. I was a little maverick out

on the prairie and that man put the Jesus mark on my forehead so that when Jesus sees me He will know that I am one of His children.” (6)

Well, yes, baptism is something like that. It does mark us as one of God’s children. But it is more than that. It is a sign of new life in Christ Jesus.

In the movie “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” three escaped convicts come across a group of people dressed in white. They are singing as they pass mysteriously through the woods toward the river. The three ne’er-do-wells follow the singers. They come upon a service down by the river where people are lining up to be baptized. One of the convicts rushes into the water to be baptized. When he emerges from the water he exclaims that the minister told him that all his sins have been washed away. Even, he says, when he stole that pig for which he’d been convicted.

“But you said you were innocent of that,” says one of his comrades. “I lied,” he says, “and that’s been washed away too!!”

And we do see a change in this former scoundrel. His friends steal an apple pie from a windowsill. But a hand reaches up and leaves money for the apple pie. It is this newly baptized saint of God.

Baptism is more than a ceremony. It is more than a symbol. Something that deals with the hidden reality. Baptism is a renewing of the mind. It is allowing the spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit to come into our life and make us new people. There is the baptism of water, but there is also a baptism of the Holy Spirit. That happens when we consciously invite Christ to take up residence in our lives. We often say at this time of the year that we wish the Christmas spirit could stay with us all year long. This is the secret of maintaining the Christmas Spirit. It is to pray that God will send His Holy Spirit to take up a permanent residence in our lives, and that is the greatest gift that we can receive.

A certain church was performing Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. At the end of the play, miserly Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed by the meaning of Christmas. He wants to share his newfound joy with someone, so he calls to a poor newsboy, “Come up here, boy. I’ve got something wonderful for you.” Out of the audience would come a scruffy newsboy to receive a few coins. But this particular night, another little boy in the audience was so entranced by the story that he spontaneously rose and walked up to the stage when Scrooge made his announcement. He thought the invitation was for him: “Come up here, boy. I’ve got something wonderful for you.” (7)

It is something wonderful and we all are invited to receive it. God Himself has come into our world. He offers to all the gift of His Holy Spirit, His presence with us to comfort and empower. Won’t you receive that gift this day?

1. Laugh & Lift - <http://www.laughandlift.com/>.

2. The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long,
<http://www.nationalcathedral.org/worship/sermonTexts/tl080601.shtml>.
3. MONDAY FODDER, <http://family-safe-mail.com/>.
4. "Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?" *Theology, News, and Notes of Fuller Seminary* (Oct. 1999), p. 4.
5. C. Philip Green, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-sermon-central-staff-stories-christmas-78736.asp>.
6. *The Evangelical Christian*.
7. "A World Without Christmas" by C. Thomas Hilton, *The Clergy Journal*, Nov./Dec. 2000, p. 44.

KING DUNCAN

III Desiano

When you hear the phrase, "It's no longer business as usual," how does it make you feel?

Let's face it, there's a huge part of us that likes business as usual. We can figure out what's likely to happen during our day, including the amount of work we have to do and what our income might be. Because of this predictability, special things like feasts or pieces of art stand out even more in our lives. Just look at what a disruption this pandemic has been to our "business as usual" lives?

So when John begin his ministry on the Jordan, it's a bit surprising that so many people were drawn to him. These earliest verses in Mark's Gospel make it sound like John was the equivalent of the American appearance of the Beatles. People could not get enough of him. Mark's language is meant to evoke in us jus how powerful John's message was. "It's not business as usual!"

The folk who came clearly wanted to put something behind themselves. John proclaimed a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. There were certain sects at that time which practiced a ritual of water purification almost as part of their daily lives. But John's baptism was something different. This was not joining a kind of monastic group; this was part of becoming part of a movement. People wanted disruption—in their own lives and in the life of their society.

We know from our own current experience that movements are not always welcomed. "If you don't like the country, leave it," people say. Movements can make it look like we are all going to lose something important to our daily life. What would it meant to be part of the movement that John was stirring up? "A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." What people wanted to lose was that part of their lives that set God aside, that did not take God seriously as the center of their existence.

But if John came in the desert to begin this movement, Isaiah presents the voice of God coming at another time in Jewish life proclaiming that business as usual was ending. Only this was not a disruption of daily life; it was a disruption of the decades-long exile that the Jewish people suffered at the hands of Babylon. In other words, if God would disrupt the daily life that we feel comfortable with, God can also disrupt the broken lives that need to be healed. "Comfort, give comfort to my people; speak tenderly to Jerusalem."

Advent is a time when God wants to disrupt our lives, when God invites us to look at the things we have come to accept as our ordinary lives. Because we develop patterns that blur our vision of God, that put God in boxes that we feel we can control. But God's invites us with purpose: to help us put behind ourselves that things that exile us from the true and deepest values in our lives. God comforts us by giving us a way to find reconciliation with each other as well as with God.

You might have seen the recent story of the monolith sculpture, a large bar of iron, that people discovered in the desert in Utah. Who put it there and what does it mean? But, suddenly, just as mysteriously it disappeared last week. It's curious that we would be all

abuzz about a slab of metal but not abuzz about the voices of the prophets God continues to send our way.