

Sunday, December 11, 2022 – Advent III (Gaudete)

Isaiah 40:1-11 (ESV) – “A Voice Crying in the Wilderness”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ 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. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" ¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Advent can be a strange time in the church year. We know that it's not Christmas yet, but we're eagerly anticipating its coming. We know that there's a baby in a manger that's coming soon, but there's a lot more coming soon than that. This attitude of anticipation can be turned into right worship,

right belief, right practice. To set the stage, our first Gospel reading for this season comes right out of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – and part of that was foretold by the prophet Isaiah in our OT text for today. Every road will be straightened, leveled out, made easier for travel. That's what the crowds were trying to do when they placed cloaks and palm branches on the ground – they were trying to fill in the potholes! When you're planning on traveling from one city to another by animal power, without the reserves of a gasoline engine to assist you, it's a lot easier to traverse an even road instead of one that is filled with hills and valleys – it might get a little bit boring at times, but it's certainly less taxing. It's kind of like taking the expressway (think of Highway 20 in northern Iowa) instead of taking the two-lane secondary roads. The expressway might lull you to sleep, but it's certainly easier on your vehicle, and the straight-as-an-arrow ribbon of asphalt get you there a lot quicker. Just set your cruise control on 70 and sit back and watch the miles melt away!

In our text for this morning, Isaiah (writing 900 years before the coming of Christ) spoke of the glorious Day of the Lord that is coming soon. Of course, when you're dealing with prophesy, you have to figure out exactly what event in the future that the prophet is referring to. Sometimes, this is difficult, because the prophet is referring to more than one event with the same writing – that's the case with the text that is before us! Isaiah was talking about the coming of the Savior, Jesus, into the world that He created. He was going to redeem this world from sin by His perfect life, death, and resurrection. That's what Isaiah was talking about when he speaks of the iniquity being paid off or pardoned – because Christ took the guilt and punishment of the sins of the entire world upon Himself when He was crucified, and God the Father declared that these sins were completely forgiven, removed from us, when He raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. Isaiah also foretells another coming of Jesus, this time into Jerusalem, when He rode on the donkey, on the colt, the foal of a donkey, into the city during His triumphal entry, to begin His Passion week.

However, there's a third prediction that's going on in this text, and this is the foretelling that the Early Church latched onto when they preached during the Advent season. Jesus is coming again at the end of time. We learned just a few weeks ago that we are to keep watch and always be ready for this Day to come, lest we be like the foolish virgins, and be found to be without oil when the bridegroom comes. We must realize that there is nothing that we can do to prepare for this day; we are completely dead in our trespasses and sins; dead people can't do anything but lay in the grave – they're dead! Thanks be to God that this is not the final outcome of the Day of Judgment; He has come to comfort His people with the Good News of salvation, to proclaim that the warfare between mankind and the evil one will be over soon, to make known, as it's stated in one of the many iconic solos from Handel's *Messiah*, that He shall feed His flock. Let's look at this Last Day in a bit more depth and see what we can use from this discussion to prepare us for the celebration that's now only a couple of weeks away, the marking of the Nativity of our Lord.

“All flesh is grass, and all its goodness is like the flower of the field. The green grass withers, the flower droops when the Spirit of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.” (vv. 6-7). It's no accident that talk in the church about the end of the world, the Day of Judgment, coincides with the onset of Autumn and Winter. Even though the leaves showing their true colors on the trees is beautiful to the eyes, it is fleeting; soon they will drop off of the branches, and we are left with nothing but barren limbs, swaying in the breeze.

That's how things are going to be for those who don't have the Gospel of Jesus Christ to rely upon on the Last Day – things will appear good for a time, but it won't last; the colors reappearing on the trees are signs that the “Bleak Mid-Winter” is coming soon. We are like grass – the text tells us so directly – we will dry out, be blown away, scatter to the four winds, ultimately die because of our sinful nature. We don't like to think about this – we'd rather dwell on the Gospel promises that come also in this text – but if we don't reflect upon our sinfulness, the Good News is without foundation, meaningless

in fact – we must realize just why Jesus had to come – it was the ONLY WAY for us, the children of God, to be redeemed from the curse of sin. In the same way that we focus on the new birth of the creation around us near the life restored of the empty tomb in the Spring of the year, it's no accident that when we focus on the death and emptiness of sin, the world around us is also falling apart in the way that the natural world always does this time of year.

We know this – Isaiah is channeling John the Baptist, whom we've heard from and about in the Gospel reading, but whom we're going to focus more on next week in the Gospel – we must repent of and confess our many sins. We don't want to talk about the coming Day of Judgment – we'd rather focus on living it up right now, planning for our family get-togethers, purchasing all of the wonderful gifts that we shower upon our loved ones. Even though church attendance rises considerably on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, it's still nowhere near the total number of members that are on the books. This is true not only here at OSL, but across Christendom. In order for us to prepare for the Last Day, we need to be centered in the Word of God, receiving regularly and rightly the Sacraments, mindful of our sins that separate us from God eternally. Yet, it doesn't seem to bother us – the concerns of this world get in the way; they take up our time so much, that we can't spare at least a couple of hours to come to the Divine Service and have God Himself serve us with His gifts.

We think that we have Abraham as our father – no, we aren't part of the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God, but there are other ways in which we delude ourselves into thinking that we are all right on our own when it comes to our standing before God. We don't actually read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Word of God – sure, we might come to church; sure, we might actually bow our head, fold our hands and close our eyes, as we're taught to do as children; but, does this really matter if our hearts aren't actually attuned to what's going on around us? We don't realize that we're going to be spending the rest of eternity either with the Father in heaven, or with the evil one in the fires of hell – there's no option here for a state of “blessed rest” in the ground, just rotting away. If we are going to

be in heavenly glory, shouldn't we want to know more about Jesus, what pleases Him, and what He detests? Without action from the outside, by God Himself, we're going to be included in the "brood of vipers" that John references when he speaks to the religious leaders of Jerusalem – not believing rightly, practicing rightly – in short, not being right with God.

But thanks be to God that He is our comforter, our redeemer, our only hope in a world that looks pretty hopeless. He is our Good Shepherd! This is the message that Isaiah, and all modern-day prophets, climb a high mountain to proclaim – Jesus is our Good Shepherd, Who does everything that is necessary to deliver us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven. Climbing a high mountain – same as speaking up, proclaiming the truth in a loud voice, to everyone who will listen. As we learned in Every One His Witness, this speaking takes place first with those who trust us, that we have built a relationship with, that are within our sphere of influence – they are the ones that are going to listen to us, and actually take heed to what we are saying. The Holy Spirit will give us the courage to say what needs to be said, and the steadfastness to stay on topic – Christ is the ONLY answer, the ONLY hope, the ONLY One that can and has done anything about our problem of being blown away like the weeds, because His Word endures forever.

What does a Good Shepherd do? He binds up our wounds; when we are in need of strengthening or comfort in this world of sin and pain and agony, He provides us the healing balm of His Word, His promise, His salvation. He carries the lambs (young ones) in His arms; He leads those who are nursing infants – this means that He will take special care of those who are vulnerable. Those who are sick and suffering, those who are in particular need, specific temptation because of the woes of this world, will receive special sustenance and care from Him. It's very easy for the evil one to make us think that the afflictions of this life are somehow because of us specifically, or something that we've done to cause the tough times to come. The truth of the matter is that it is the sinfulness of mankind, the original sin that plagues us, that causes all woe and sickness and death to occur. Those who are going

through difficult times need to hear the healing balm of God's Word, that He never abandons His sheep, but binds them up, carries them when necessary, leads them beside the still waters of His Word.

He pastures His flock – emphasis here by Isaiah, since it's mentioned first – that's the primary activity of the Good Shepherd. English translations vary on the verb here, but there are options such as tending it, feeding it, providing for it. When in doubt, go back to the original Hebrew word – it's the particular word that goes along with being a shepherd – to pasture the flock. Lead them into good pastures – lead into hearing the pure Word of God from pure preachers, that won't mislead or guide into that which is false, misleading and dangerous. Shepherding involves keeping the danger away from the sheep, and the sheep away from danger – that involves knowing what they're up to all the time, and making sure that it's good, "sheeplly" activity, instead of getting into mischief.

Other terms that are mentioned in this text that speak of the wonderful, salvific activity of our Good Shepherd: The glory of the LORD will be revealed – that's going to happen on the Last Day – and we need not fear this, because He has made us part of His victory, even though we sin. He has redeemed us; He has given us double for our sins – not only not punished us, but also given us the inheritance that is fit for Jesus, solely because of His love for us. He comes with might – His arm works recompense – He has the power to destroy, but He chooses to redeem, us – that's the Good News, folks.

So, even though we are grass, ready to be scattered, the Word of the Lord endures forever. Even though we are sinners, completely corrupted by our sinful nature, God the Father decided that His Son, Jesus, would suffer in our place, and rise again, to signal our resurrection at the end of time. As we draw ever nearer to the Last Day, let us remember this simple, but easily disguised, message – our Good Shepherd, Jesus, takes care of us, and brings us through this vale of tears to Himself in heaven. Not because we've deserved it (because we haven't), but because He loves us, does He do this completely transforming act. As Luther says in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, "For all this it is my duty to thank, praise, serve and obey Him." The Holy Spirit urges this from within us and

keeps us in the true faith until life everlasting. Let us be driven to hear the Word of God, and partake of His blessed Sacraments, all the more as the Day of Judgment approaches. By doing this, we will be well-prepared for the Second Coming of Jesus which we, along with Isaiah and the other prophets, anticipate with bated breath. As John says in his book of Revelation, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Or, as I'd paraphrase it today, come quickly, come in Your perfect time, but if that time could be soon, it'd be all the better! Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.