

## Advent 2B

St Mark's, Tampa

7 December 2008

✠ **I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

39 chapters of doom. 39 chapters of condemnation. 39 chapters of judgment.

That's how the Book of Isaiah starts off. Oh sure, there are some lighter bits scattered here and there, some crumbs of hope, some gleams of light, but for the most part . . .

39 chapters of doom. 39 chapters of condemnation. 39 chapters of judgment.

And then, suddenly, as the fortieth chapter begins, the clouds lift, and we hear a sweet heavenly voice saying:

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid.

The last few Sundays have been tough. As in the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, we've had doom and condemnation and judgment. We have heard "Throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." We have heard "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." We have heard that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

But today the clouds lift, and we hear that sweet heavenly voice saying, "Comfort, O comfort my people."

I'm ready for that, aren't you?

Of course, we also hear a voice that doesn't sound quite as sweet. Somehow I don't imagine John the Baptist – living in the open air, eating locusts and wild honey, clothed

like the prophets of old – sounding like a lyric tenor. He’s preaching repentance, not comfort, right? Bellowing like a foghorn, I imagine. Not soothing. Not comforting.

And the *place*. He’s calling people out into the wilderness. Now the wilderness is a real place – it’s the barren region east of Jerusalem – but it’s also a powerful symbol. For the Jews, the wilderness was the place of wandering. It was the place of punishment for disobedience. It was the place where you encountered the devastating consequences of your own selfishness and rebellion and pigheadedness and negligence.

The wilderness is a hard place to be. There are no malls there, and Amazon.com does not deliver there. There is nothing there to keep us occupied but the constant, searing reminder that we are wandering in rebellion. We don’t want to go out into the wilderness and face up to the things we’ve done and the things we’ve left undone.

So the wilderness is a hard place to be. And yet people were *flocking* to the wilderness: “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” How would John the Baptist, of all people, draw such crowds out into the wilderness? By telling them it was time to get ready, that one who was stronger than he was about to come. And people recognized in his croaking, hoarse, bellowing voice the heavenly voice that speaks out of Isaiah:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

So they went into the wilderness to prepare the way of the LORD, to be ready for the coming of the one who was more powerful than John the Baptist, the one who would drench them in the Holy Spirit.

The way of the LORD starts in the wilderness. I wish it didn’t, because the wilderness is a hard place to be, but it does. So something needs to call us out there, some John the Baptist who shakes us up and tells us that the time for delay, the time for half-heartedness, is over.

Who is your John the Baptist? Pay attention to that voice, that urgent voice, calling you out into your wilderness to face the selfishness or rebellion or pigheadedness or negligence that you do not want to face, telling you to get ready for the coming of the one who is mightier than you, the one who will drench you in the Holy Spirit.

Many of us, I'm sure, have been in that wilderness. Some impending crisis, some sudden dawning awareness of the coming of the Lord, has drawn us out there. And though we do not want to face there the things we have to face there, we know that that is where the way of the Lord begins. Though it is painful to face there the things we have to face there, we can testify that the voice we hear in that wilderness is a sweet voice. It whispers of comfort, and it tells us that we have served our term, that our penalty has been paid.

He is coming. He is coming in the Sacrament of the Altar. He is coming at Christmas. He is coming at the end of the age. Go out into the wilderness, into the place where you must face the things you do not want to face, and find there the place where the way of the LORD begins. And be ready, be ready to "greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer," to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*