

“Heralds of Good Tidings”

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings...”

Mornings at North Plainfield High School always began in a similar fashion: we would gather in our homerooms for attendance, and would then stand to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Then, before we were dismissed to our first class of the day, we would listen as Morning Announcements were broadcast over the school’s PA system. These announcements usually included upcoming events, which teams were competing that day, the menu in the school cafeteria, and other important notices for students and teachers. On occasion, the speaker of these announcements would depart from the usual agenda to share some good news with all who were within the school building: a special guest speaker at morning assembly, or a new scoreboard on the football field, or a nonscheduled day off from school. At these moments, the announcer became a “herald of good tidings,” sharing good news with all who were gathered to hear these surprising and welcome words.

There are any ways in which people have served as heralds (or bearers) of good tidings over the years. Town criers were once a regular feature in small villages, going through the streets shouting the news of the day and especially sharing welcome news with the people. The arrival of the printing press meant that glad tidings could be heralded in print, reaching far more people than even the loudest town crier. The invention of radio and television brought the sounds of the heralds of good tidings (and also, sadly, heralds of bad tidings) to vast communities of listeners. And the technological revolution in the midst of which we are living brings the voices and words of bearers of all sorts of tidings instantaneously to audiences throughout the world. The heralds of good tidings no longer have to “*get you up to a high mountain*” to broadcast the good news they have been instructed to share.

The position of “tidings bearer” has its origins in ancient warfare; this was a soldier who was dispatched from the front to announce the result of battle (“*Then Ahimaaz son of Zadok said, ‘Let me run, and carry tidings to the king that the LORD has delivered him from the power of his enemies.’*” – 2 Samuel 18:19). This is the role to which the prophet Isaiah calls the people of Zion to undertake in the words from today’s First Lesson, words that were to be addressed to the people of God who were living in exile in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. As the “herald of good tidings,” the people of God are instructed to “*lift up your voice with strength ... lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’*” (Isaiah 40:9). The Lord has words of good tidings to share with his people, and the people are called to be the ones who will bear this word of comfort and hope to “*the people who walked in darkness [who have now] seen a great light.*” (Isaiah 9:2).

The 40th chapter of Isaiah marks a major shift in this prophetic book; words that had been spoken to the people of Judah to warn them of the coming judgment that was the result of their disobedience to the teachings of God now become words of news to the defeated nation that God has not forgotten them, but is still abiding with them and will deliver safely back to their homes. The chapter begins with a double imperative; the people are commanded “*comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*” (40:1). In the Old Testament, consolation and care for victims of calamity, for parents whose children have died, for persons without the means to sustain themselves and those vulnerable to physical threat and bodily harm are frequently proclaimed:

- “All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort [Jacob]; but he refused to be comforted, and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’” – Genesis 37:35.

- “Then [Ruth] said, ‘May I continue to find favour in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.’” – Ruth 2:13.
- “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.” – Psalm 23:4.

On the other hand, oppressors and enemies are those who fail to extend comfort or pity:

- “Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power – with no one to comfort them.” – Ecclesiastes 4:1.
- “Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.” – Psalm 69:20.

The people who God commands to be comforted are to “speak tenderly” (literally “speak to the heart”) to Jerusalem, the defeated and exiled people who were once the inhabitants of the holy city, a people conquered after refusing to heed to prophets’ calls to repent, reform and be reconciled to God. Far from being innocent victims of injustice, their destruction and exile *“were a well-deserved punishment”* (Elna K. Solvang). But now the time of punishment is at an end: *“she has served her term ... her penalty is paid.”* Comfort comes in the good news that the people have been released from the penalty of their debt and will now be the recipients of God’s promise of restoration and hope. They hear the voice that cries out *“in the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”* (40:3). This “highway” will become the way for exiles to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem, renewing a promise the Lord had spoken to the prophet earlier in this prophetic book:

- “A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” – 35:8-10.

The voice that cried out to announce that *“the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken”* (40:5) once again says, “Cry out!” This time, however, those who hear these words respond *“what shall I cry?”* as they reflect upon the temporary nature of human endeavor: *“All people are like grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.”* (40:6). The image of grass applied to human endeavor was previously cited in 37:27: *“... their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded; they have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown.”* Grass withers and flowers fade – and such is humanity. Yet there is one aspect of their lives which remains constant: *“the word of our God will stand forever.”* (40:8).

It is the word of eternal hope that is to be the content of the people’s role as the “herald of good tidings,” who is Zion’s own special emissary and emblem who gets up on a high mountain to see God’s approach on the horizon. As the “tidings bearers” return from the battlefield with news of the results of warfare, the “bearers of good tidings” will announce God’s triumphant arrival to the cities of Judah. As the cities of Judah had been the first to bear the brunt of the Babylonians’ assaults (*“Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood.”* – 34:3), so also are they the first to witness God’s victory and triumph. The ultimate “comforting” of Zion is God’s own final reclaiming of God’s people, when *“he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”* (40:11).

The good tidings of comfort and hope that these heralds were called to proclaim to God's people in the midst of their darkest hour are the same tidings "of comfort and joy" that are proclaimed to us through all of our readings from God's Word this morning. They are the words proclaimed in Psalm 85, when even in the midst of their communal lament the people of God hear the good news of God's promise of peace and salvation that will be marks of the era when the people return from exile:

· "Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you, that your glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Faithfulness shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven. The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness shall go before the LORD and shall prepare for God a pathway." – 85:9-13.

Steadfast love and faithfulness are at the heart of God's character; the good news that the psalmist heralds to all people is that God *will* set things right.

Centuries later, the second letter of Peter heralds the good tidings that God's promises are trustworthy and true, that in spite of the presence of false teachers in the midst of the church who were casting doubts about Christ's promised second coming God's people can trust that God will indeed accomplish all that God has purposed. While some in the first century church were disappointed that Christ's return had not been as imminent as they had supposed (*"Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."* – Mark 13:30), the Apostle assures them that *"the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."* (3:9). As *"with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day"* (3:8), so also God's *"thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD."* (Isaiah 55:8). As Paul assured the Philippians that *"the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:7), so does the Apostle herald the good news to his readers that *"in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."* (3:13), striving while we wait for all these things to come to fruition to lead *"lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God"* (3:11-12).

Of all the "heralds of good tidings" whose voices we hear in these days of Advent, the one whose voice cries out above all others John the Baptist, the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise of the voice that cries out, *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* (40:3). At *"the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"* in Mark, *"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,"* the traditional place from where salvation comes, *"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* (1:4). The repentance and anticipation evoked by John's preaching provided a receptive audience for Jesus' ministry, for John's role is to herald the arrival of *"the one who is more powerful than I [who] is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* (1:7-8).

God has raised up in the midst of his people these and other "heralds of good tidings" who are called to *"proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* That same call has been issued to God's people in every generation, for the in baptism we are joined to the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" that has been called to *"let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."* (Matthew 5:16). As our risen Lord commissioned the disciples to be his *"witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8), the apostolic church is entrusted with that same responsibility to be the heralds of the good tidings that God's Word proclaims to every generation. The church is *"a house in which only the Word of God resounds"* (Martin Luther, "Sermon in Pleissenburg"); the Church of Jesus Christ is *"the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel."* (Augsburg Confession). The

central mission of the church is to be the “herald of good tidings” to all people; the unique role we play in our community, our nation, and our world is to share the word of “comfort and joy” that comes to us in Advent as we wait in hope for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all people and all nations.

- “The world can do almost anything as well or better than the Church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or care for the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.” – Gordon MacDonald.

No one else but the Church of Jesus Christ will be the “herald of good tidings” in this season, offering the good news that the light of Christ shines in the increasing darkness of our world, and *“though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet.”* Only the Church will proclaim the “tidings of comfort and joy” that *“to you is born this day in the city of David and Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”* (Luke 2:11). Only the Church will bring the message of eternal hope that calls us to focus once again on that little town of Bethlehem, where *“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

- “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

If we do not lift up our voices as the heralds of the good news of the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives – who will? Amen.