

“Get Ready for Good”

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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Sometimes I think it's a shame that we don't have walls around our cities any more. Especially for us Americans whose history is really quite recent in the scheme of things, there's a certain romantic quality to pictures of old cities with walls and turrets and gigantic creaking gates that close at dusk. Towering stone walls make the sort of place where you might come across a fairy story, or a tale of heroism, or a chivalrous romance. What's more, in our day of suburban sprawl and megalopolises, there's something quaintly helpful about a visible, physical boundary between the city and the country, between urban and rural, between civilization and nature. The city gate is more than just a doorway, it's a portal between worlds, and you never know what might happen in those kinds of places.

But of course those cities that actually do have walls like that don't just have them for a sense of ambiance or to boost their tourism revenue. Once upon a time, walls served a very practical purpose. Walled cities were at one time a cutting-edge piece of military hardware. The better your city's walls, the better you could withstand attack, and therefore the more powerful your country was. So rather than thinking of walls as having a charming old-world feel to them, I might view them a bit differently if they were the only thing standing between me and tens of thousands of enemy soldiers determined to kill me and burn my home to the ground.

Many people at many times in history have, of course, viewed walls in exactly this way. The prophet Isaiah, who wrote some of the most beautiful and enduring words of all time, lived through such times. He saw his homeland endure terrible trials throughout his life; it was an era of massive political shifts, and the little kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem its capital was caught right in the middle of the instability. The massive empires around them were beginning to gobble up little kingdoms like theirs, and they sat right on top of a valuable trade route. At one point during Isaiah's long life, word reached Jerusalem that Israel and Aram, two of their neighboring countries, were taking advantage of the general upheaval and were allying with one another in an attack on Jerusalem. Things couldn't get much worse — and then they did. Later on, the unstoppable Assyrian army, which plowed right over Aram and Israel, sent a massive army — at least 185,000 strong — to lay siege to Jerusalem.

That city wall and its creaking gates now mark the boundary between life and death, light and darkness, survival and utter destruction. It's hard to imagine what that would be like, to be closed in a city like a prisoner, but escape from the prison walls can mean only death. I imagine that only the soldiers would be allowed on top of the walls, so the rest of us are stuck within, imagining the hordes of enemies just on the other side of the stone. Maybe from time to time we can hear their war cries, or the noise of their camp, or their siege tactics designed to starve us and kill us, but we can only imagine their countless faces. This side of the wall, the inside, isn't really much better, though, since the point of a siege is to starve an entire city until dying is preferable to living. You can't grow nearly enough food inside a city, but even if you could get past the enemy army, they have surely already eaten or destroyed all of your fields and farms on the outside. Never mind the enemies outside; what might your own friends turn into in such desperate straits?

And into that raging, starving, malevolent darkness comes the word of God. “Comfort, comfort my people,” He says through Isaiah. “See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and He rules with a mighty arm. See, His reward is with Him, and His recompense accompanies Him. 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.” As is so often the case when it comes to prophecy, Isaiah’s message had a meaning both for the people he first preached it to as well as for future generations. Into those times of fear and darkness, when all seemed surely lost, God made promises. Sometimes deliverance came swiftly, and sometimes it came many years later, but there were promises of good things in bad times.

And this is Advent. Advent is not Christmas. Advent is not a time of joy and lights and celebration; that’s Christmas. Advent is a time of hope and darkness and anticipation. It’s a time of looking intently into the darkness, letting our eyes soak it up until they’re starved for light, so that we’ll be that much more dazzled when the light breaks in. Before the feast, we must fast to make sure we’re really hungry enough for the feast. Before the celebration comes the promise, and we need to listen to the promise and cultivate a yearning for it to make sure we’re celebrating its arrival rightly.

We do not celebrate cookies and decorations, presents and lighted trees. We do not celebrate the ambiguously-defined but much touted “holiday spirit” that is so pervasive in Christmas movies. We do not even celebrate tradition or togetherness or friendship or family. No, we celebrate the promise of our God, the promise of good things, the promise that God is for us and God is with us. We celebrate that good things are coming.

But in the times of growing darkness, it seems like those promises are all we have to hang onto. We have to wait on those good things while the enemy is at the gates. But here’s the thing: good things are worth waiting for. Isaiah and his people waited on deliverance from their enemies. For centuries after that, they waited on the Messiah that Isaiah and people like him had promised, one who would be the presence of the Lord Himself and would make all things right. Today we wait on that Messiah’s return to complete His work, and in the meantime we struggle with many of the same areas of darkness that the world faced before His first coming: we face death, disease, fear, loneliness, addiction, and on and on.

But good things are worth waiting for, and they are worth waiting *well* for. They are worth preparation, planning, anticipation, carving out a space in your life for them. Good things are worth having the boldness and trust and faith to tell the darkness that the light is coming, and I will get ready for it.

John the Baptist, this forerunner to the public ministry of Jesus who is so often our focus during Advent, was in much the same position as Isaiah. He, too, was waiting in the darkness and fear and oppression, waiting for God’s good things to arrive. He, too, had a mission to accomplish as a messenger of God’s promise that good things were coming. Isaiah had preached “comfort, comfort” to God’s people, and he had promised that there would be a herald making ready the way of the Lord, and John was filling that role. Now John had the task of being that voice in the desert, promising that the glory of the Lord would be revealed, that the mountains would be made low and the valleys would be lifted up, that God would be coming like a conquering king to claim His kingdom.

Isaiah spent time in the prison of the city walls under siege, and John spent his time out in the wilderness, confronting people not only with the reality of God's promise but also with the reality of their lack of preparation. John didn't live in a time of siege; he lived in a time of occupation. The invasion had long since happened, and the bad guys had won. What's more, God's people had been waiting for centuries for God's promises to be fulfilled, and they were getting impatient. Factions were splitting, and rebellions were breaking out, and in many areas the faith of the people was wavering. John called them out into the wild places, away from the political compromises, to be confronted by God's promises.

At that place of confrontation, you have to make your choice: trust the darkness or trust the light. In the darkness, God has promised a light. In the evil times, God has promised that His good kingdom will come. You can either prepare for the darkness or the light. And we all know that in the dark, as much as we long for the light, sometimes it can be hard to hope for. Sometimes the dark seems endless and impenetrable.

For Isaiah, hope in God's promise of good things flew in the face of obvious military realities. For John, hope in God's promise of good things relied not only on God's faithfulness, but also on the faithfulness of whoever this Messiah turned out to be. I for one find it a lot easier to have faith in myself than in someone else, especially if I don't know them. Even John, at the end of his life, needed assurance that he had discerned the correct Messiah. But still, they prepared, they made ready the way of the Lord, they trusted the promise, and they placed their hope in the good things of God rather than the darkness of the world.

What does this preparation look like? What does this bold trust in the unseen-yet-hoped-for good things of God's presence involve? We make room for something by evaluating what we have and deciding what to move or throw out to give space for what's coming. It's an evaluation of what our priorities are: if we place enough value on the good things that are coming, we'll clear out whatever we need to in order to make room for it. Or, as Isaiah puts it, we "make straight in the desert a highway for our God;" we clear out the mountains and we fill in the valleys so that the way is smooth and the traveling is swift. We clear out anything that might impede the coming of God's good kingdom. John called people to repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. He called them to trust in God's goodness in spite of their failures and demonstrate it by turning away from their sin and being ceremonially cleansed by God's grace.

Advent is the promise that good things are coming: God's kingdom will arrive in its fullness, and therefore we are willing to trust in His promise enough to make our souls and our lives and our families and our world ready for His arrival.

Psalm 126 is a psalm of ascents, which means that it was probably a song sung by ancient pilgrims as they made their ascent toward Jerusalem to celebrate their religious festivals. So as they traveled and looked forward to encountering God's promises for them, they might have sung this: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the desert. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of

joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.”

Our task during Advent is to sing a song like that, a song of hope and trust in what is not yet here. Our task is to trust that even in the darkest times of our lives, God’s good kingdom is coming, that though we sow with tears, we know that God will help us to reap with songs of joy. And we declare that we are willing to wait in the darkness because the good things are worth waiting on. During one of the invasions he lived through, Isaiah promised that his wife would give birth to a child, and that child would be a living, breathing sign of trust that there would be future generations living in the land, because God would be faithful to His promise of goodness. John called people to come out to the wilderness and trust that God’s promise of repentance works, that preparing the way for the coming of the Lord will not result in disappointment because God will honor our smooth highways.

We are to be for our world like Isaiah or John the Baptist, carrying with us that message of preparation and hope. Advent comes at the darkest time of the year, and that’s no accident. We are literally living with less light until nearly the time of Christmas, when we’re “halfway out of the dark.” In this time, we live and sing and work and play as those who trust that good things are coming, and they are worth waiting for, and we will wait well. Let us make our lives ready for the coming of the Lord, and boldly proclaim God’s promise of light.



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