

Tidings of Comfort and Joy

Sermon, January 9, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 3:1-18, 21-22

We just sang, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay ... O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy." Now, that traditional Christmas carol has been around for a loooong time, although I think that's only the second time we've sung it in my twenty-five years here. In Charles Dickens' day, the latter half of the nineteenth century (*Dickens passed away in 1870, at the age of 58*); the song had also been around a long time and was well known even then. This particular carol finds its way into Dickens' classic novel, A Christmas Carol; in fact, some have speculated it may be something of the "theme carol" of the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man who didn't "rest merry" until he faced up to his past. In the book, it reads as follows: "At the first sound of 'God [rest] you merry, gentlemen ...' Scrooge seized a ruler with such energy ... that the singer fled in terror." The correct placing of the comma is important, by the way ... what many people misunderstand when the comma is missing or misplaced is that the lyrics connote, "All you merry gentlemen. may God grant you repose." No, it's "God rest ye merry, COMMA, gentlemen." "Merry" in this sense can mean "pleasant; harmonious, content." This is almost a sermon in itself, but the meaning of "God rest ye merry" is akin to "May God keep all of you in a state of blessed and contented restfulness ... as in rested, refreshed, feeling well and healthy, whole, complete. May He cause you to continue in a state of blessed wholeness, peaceful contentment, shalom." It's also roughly akin to the benedictory, "May God bless you and keep you (*in that state of blessedness*). We say "may he/she rest in peace" when a person passes away, which means we are expressing our wishes for that person to be in a blessed state of shalom, wholeness, peace forever. I often make the point during funeral services that when we in the church speak of someone being "at rest," that does NOT mean the person has ceased to be active, alive, as if the dearly departed is somehow taking an eternal nap. It means that individual is "at rest" in the sense that he/she is now experiencing the eternal end of rest-lessness. All the things that make us rest-less in this life, all the things which cause our **un**-rest, our **dis**-ease, in this world, are no more in the world to come. The promise of the Gospel is that the dearly departed redeemed are at rest as in **rested**, vigorously whole, pain free, more alive than ever **FOR**ever ... in the presence of our Lord. Anyway, to summarize: What the carol's writers had in mind was: "Gentlemen, may God keep you in a **MOST** pleasant state of rest, wholeness, shalom."... and Ebenezer Scrooge would not rest merry, he would not have shalom, until he faced his past.

Long before the novel was written, long before the carol was composed, an assignment was given by God to certain messengers to convey "tidings of comfort and joy." More precisely, it was a command to convey the message of Comfort, and the message of resultant Joy is implied. We have it there in the verses in our reading from Isaiah; "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God." Or "Comfort ye, comfort ye" in the King James Version, which more accurately conveys the plurality of messengers to which this is being conveyed. You may remember the word "comfort" comes from two Latin words, "cum" and "forte", which literally means, "with strength." Paraphrased, "Encourage My people, all you messengers, come 'with strength' for them, joyfully telling them their sin has been paid for, their hard service has been completed." In today's Gospel, we are introduced to John the Baptist with the same words used by Isaiah the Prophet. John arrives on the scene as the messenger preaching these tidings of comfort and joy.

At first reading, John's words don't appear comforting or joyful; they appear to be harsh words of judgment. But I'm convinced the purpose of John's words is not so much to indict, as it is to invite ... he is comforting his audience in the original sense of that word by inviting them to joyfully get ready to receive a Savior who is coming to them. John wasn't wringing his hands and cynically, sadly, harshly lamenting, "Oh, how awful. Look what this world is coming to!" His message was a joyful, comforting, optimistic proclamation, "Oh how wonderful! Look what is coming to this world! Prepare, get ready, for His arrival!" His news IS good news, tidings of comfort and joy. Among other things, Joyful John is saying there is hope that despite all the evidence to the contrary, we are not stuck with our worst selves. Because of Who is coming into this world, we can change. Because of Who is coming into this world, we can be different. Because of Who is coming into this world, we can be better ... better than we ever thought possible. And that is good news indeed! Again, the purpose of John's preaching was not so much to **indict**, as it is to **invite** ... a gracious invitation to joyfully get ready to receive the Lord, the Ultimate bearer and giver of God's comfort and joy!

When we last looked at this passage, I mentioned how we tell people "Make yourselves comfortable. Make yourselves right at home." (*that was back once upon a time when we used to be allowed to have company*). Well, if you think about it, "make yourselves right at home" can be a loving invitation and it can also be something of a bold challenge! In fact, it might even be part of a great mission statement for a church! We want to be about doing all we can with the help of God's grace and love and mercy and strength to make things right and good, starting with being "right" and good and honest and trustworthy and dependable in our homes where we live! Yes, by God's grace, aid and leading, DO "make yourselves **RIGHT** at home." And to mix metaphors a bit, all will be "right at home" when the right, the good, the true, the honorable, the dependable *is* comfortably at home in our homes and lives. Then, we will "rest merry."

In short, John tells those who will hear to do what it takes to make themselves RIGHT at home! Remove whatever it might be that might hinder God's saving approach in their lives, just get it out of the way. He tells them in so many words that in order to make themselves RIGHT at home, they will need to repent. They will need to do what they can to make their lives a place where RIGHT will BE at home. And to do that, they are going to need grace and help; they are going to need a Savior, a Savior Who will come to them right at home to help make things "right" at home. Yes, at the heart of John's tidings of comfort and joy is the difficult word "repentance" ... that word that means not only being sorry for our sins, but being sorry enough to QUIT! Genuine repentance is not about sowing your wild oats six days a week then on the seventh day coming to church to pray for a crop failure. John says, in so many words, *"Don't just talk the talk, walk the walk! Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. God is interested in your fruits, not your roots!"*

As we pray every Sunday, *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* As we pray that prayer, we do so with the intention of trying to make this earth more like heaven by the good and right and honorable conduct of our lives, by inviting His kingdom to come to our earthly home. Who doesn't long to be right at home? That's a universal human instinct. Isaiah was speaking to Jewish exiles who longed to be right at home; in fact, the Old Testament history is that they weren't at home in the first place largely because of so many things they didn't do RIGHT at home when they were at home over the years! The voice of the prophet proclaims in Isaiah 40 and is reiterated in Luke 3, *"Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God,"*. He is using what would be familiar imagery to these exiles. In the days of the Babylonian empire, engineer soldiers known as "sappers" would precede the monarch as he traveled in his chariot. The herald would give the command, *"Prepare the way for the king,"* and the sappers would virtually construct the king's road as he traveled through the wilderness. They leveled hills, built up ditches, filled in holes, removed dead wood ... whatever would hinder the king's approach, they would take care of it in order to enable the royal chariot to make speed.

This message of the need for repentance apparently brought the crowds out. **Huge** crowds, we are told, came to listen to and be baptized by John. Why? Because I really do think people want to be *right* at home. Again, it is a universal human longing to be comfortable in the full sense of that word, **to rest merry**, to be "right at home." People want to be able to enjoy what's good and right. People want to be able to trust each other. People want to be able to trust their leaders and representatives and their neighbors and their families, people long to have the peace and confidence and contentment and joy that comes when we can trust others to be right and honorable and trustworthy and good. And, for that matter, we long to be able to live in the comfort of knowing our goodness and trust and courtesy will not be taken advantage of by unscrupulous others who use our "niceness" to take advantage of us and manipulate or control us. When things are NOT right in our homes, in our communities, in our nation ... that's when we have great difficulty feeling right at home.

The people asked, *"What should we do? What should we do to make ourselves 'right at home'?"* That is what they really wanted to know. John simply replies with such things as, *"Well, whoever has two coats should share with anyone who has none. Those who have food should share it with those who don't. Tax collectors should not cheat. Soldiers should not bully people. And be content with your wages."* And so on. These prescriptions are striking in their obvious simplicity. John is not telling these people things they did not know. He is not asking them to do anything heroic. He is simply telling them to do the right thing as they have opportunity, beginning right now (*which, come to think of it, simply doing the right and honorable thing is becoming increasingly heroic these days; but that's almost another sermon.*) To this list we could add other things that we know to be right, things we know we ought to do. *"Treat your spouse or your children with respect and love. Don't complain so much (Teddy Roosevelt: "Complaining about a problem without posing a solution is called Whining.") Honor your commitments. Stop lying. Quit cheating."* John basically tells them to start doing what they already know to be right, right now, and watch as God rides right on in! Take simple, purposeful, everyday decisions to "make yourselves right at home;" take steps to make the crooked straight ... and then watch your Redeemer ride right on in to make things right at home.

Doing the right thing isn't really all that complicated. But it CAN be hard. Or, as someone else put it, doing the right thing is simple, but it isn't always easy. More often than not, the problem isn't not knowing what we ought to do. The problem isn't even wanting to do what we know we ought to do. The problem is actually carrying through and DOING it, taking the risk and making the effort and following through. For various reasons what we know is the right thing to do may just be too daunting, too frightening, too intimidating; we think it's going to take more energy and resolve and effort than we think we can give. We need help. But we really don't discover we need help until we make the sincere effort to actually *do* what is right. We find we need help making the crooked straight. We need help smoothing out the rough edges of our lives. We need help filling the huge gaps of need. We need help removing the dead wood and tangled branches of neglect that impede our living. We need help raising our children, we need help setting a higher tone at the office, we need help honoring our promises and commitments ... in short, we need help being right at home. And the voice of the one crying in the wilderness says, *"That's RIGHT! Now you are ready for the tidings of comfort and joy. Now you are ready for a Savior. Prepare the way of the Lord."*

Even so, come, Lord Jesus, with tidings of comfort and joy. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.