

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon  
December 4, 2011  
Isaiah 40.1-11  
"The Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken"  
Pastor John Guthrie

Most of you have probably run across lists of church bulletin bloopers at least once. These lists contain typo's and other errors that turn out to be funny in some way. Whether these excerpts really ever appeared in some bulletin somewhere, I don't know. But they always bring a smile to me. Here are a few I found dealing with the church choir.

- Next Thursday there will be tryouts for the choir. They need all the help they can get.
- Eight new choir robes are currently needed, due to the addition of several new choir members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
- The choir invites any member of the congregation who enjoys sinning to join them.
- Next Sunday the pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, "Break Forth into Joy."

If you are familiar with George Frederik Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*, you may have found yourself humming parts of it during our reading of Isaiah chapter 40: "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People;" "Every Valley Shall Be Exalted;" "And The Glory of the Lord."

The general consensus is that this part of Isaiah is written to the Israelites who are in exile in Babylon, the last remnants of their elite classes having been carried off there in the year 586 BC. It is difficult, perhaps impossible for us to fully comprehend the depth of despair, hopelessness, fear, and dejection suffered by the people of Israel as a result of their exile. The land of Israel had been promised to them by God, and there are numerous passages that indicate they understood that they would live in their homeland forever. Indeed, some of the most striking of those passages are in the early chapters of Isaiah.

Their temple had been built on the hill of Zion in the holy city of Jerusalem. Both the city and the temple were considered sacred and permanent. A descendant of King David, according to many passages of scripture, would reign in Jerusalem forever. Now the city lies in ruins, the temple burned to the ground, all of the sacred temple furnishings carried off to Babylon, the priests in chains, the king purposefully blinded by the Babylonians and also imprisoned in Babylon.

Very shortly after their removal to Babylon, the Israelites are allowed by their overlords to establish businesses, to grow crops, to build houses. At least for most of them, their existence is nothing like it was under the Egyptians, where they were forced to work as slaves. But they are not living in their holy land, their holy city, and they are not worshipping in their sacred temple on their sacred mountain. The descendant of David does not reign over them.

Where is their God? Is the Babylonian god Marduk more powerful than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? They cry out for release and return to their land, but nothing happens. The biblical book of Lamentations is filled with desperate and even hopeless expressions of grief over the exile. But perhaps the most poignant expression of that grief is found in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept

when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.

In this context, Isaiah writes:

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,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:  
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
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.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

To a people defeated, discouraged, hopeless, and despondent, to a people wondering if their God exists, if their God cares, if their God is weaker than other gods, Isaiah writes words of hope, joy, and comfort. The time of their punishment is over. The LORD is getting ready to do something amazing. Watch! Watch and see!

The last two verses of the passage read like this:

See, the Lord God comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
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.

That's really quite amazing in the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures. The God who comes with might will feed his flock like a shepherd. The God who arm rules for him will gather his lambs in his arms. The Lord whose recompense goes before him will gently lead the mother sheep.

All of these images of sheep refer to the people of Israel, of course. The same God who rules the earth with complete authority (not the Babylonian Marduk) will soon come with power, and carry his sheep home. To their home. To the land of Israel. The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people will see it, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Some six hundred years later the people of Israel again sit under the yoke of a foreign power. This time it is the Romans. They are again living in their promised land, growing crops and fishing, raising their families, worshiping in their rebuilt sacred temple on their sacred mountain in their holy city. But they are not really free. And they long for a descendant of David to come and destroy the Romans. They look for a deliverer, a conqueror. They look for the one they call the Messiah, the Anointed One. And even though most of them never realize it, he comes.

Mark quotes Isaiah chapter 40 and applies that quotation to John the Baptizer, who has been sent by the LORD to prepare the way for that Messiah, that Anointed One. People from all over Judea come to John to be baptized. He says to them, "The one who is more powerful than I 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." Through John, the mouth of the LORD has spoken once again.

So the question to us, in this day, in this time, as we draw to the end of the Year of our Lord 2011, is: Do we also trust that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and indeed IS BEING revealed each and every day, even though the wrong seems oft so strong. Even though we lie under the yoke of financial distress, family strife, physical illness, the suffering and passing of loved ones. Even though our national leaders seem incapable of dealing with an economic situation that looks increasingly dire. Even though the earth is still filled with warfare, bloodshed, intolerance, hatred, famine, illness, and the death of children.

In spite of all that, can we proclaim with Isaiah: The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. Can we also proclaim: Lift up your voice with strength! Lift it up; do not fear. Say to the faithful ones, "Here is your God!" Can we proclaim with our voices and with our lives that the LORD is coming with might, but he will feed his flock like a shepherd, carry the lambs in his arms, and gently lead the mother sheep?

That all of these things have already been fulfilled in the one who called himself the Good Shepherd, who was born in a stable in the village of Bethlehem, who came to live among us.

And even more, we look for the fulfillment of all of the LORD's promises, when that same Good Shepherd returns. That's what we do during this season of Advent. We remember with joy that the LORD has come among us in Jesus of Nazareth. And we look forward with hope to the Day when he returns.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.