

BEHOLD, YOUR GOD! Isaiah 40:9

Over these last few weeks of Advent, we have been exploring God's words of comfort to his people. There have been three key "cries" that carry out God's command and promise that his people will be comforted in the midst of their exile, their wilderness longings, and their cry for rescue. The cry that fulfills God's command for comfort is "prepare a highway in the desert" (Isa 40:3-5). It is *in* the experience of wilderness that God begins his work of forming a people after his own heart. And it is *out* of the desert that God calls his people, leading them along a road of safety and security.

The second cry that fulfills God's command to comfort his people is the proclamation that the Word of the Lord stands forever (Isa 40:8). All our attempts at self-rescue, all our attempts to order our own lives according to our humanly limited vision will inevitably fail – "all flesh is like grass, the grass withers, the flower fades..." But God's Word endures forever. And this Word is the actual living, creating, real presence of God in our midst. It is this Word that speaks order out of the chaos. It is this Word that fulfills the promise of God to make his home with us and among us.

And finally, we hear the threefold cry that completes God's comfort for his people: "**Lift up your voice, O herald of good tidings. Behold, here is your God!**"

Lift up your voice, O herald of good tidings. For the Israelites, the good tidings were very good indeed. Finally, after generations of being homeless, in exile, separated from family and friends, and more significantly, separated from God himself – finally God had heard the call for rescue of his people and he had arrived to do something about it. Pretty good news for the people. In those days, the herald would be sent out to shout this message from every available venue: street corners, roof tops, and mountain tops. Freedom at last. Restoration at last. Renewal of their identity and community at last.

What kind of good tidings do we proclaim this Christmas? In our culture, we are pretty good at getting into the Christmas "spirit". We "herald" to both friends and strangers "happy holidays", and "merry Christmas". We shout out holiday spirit by way of seasonal generosity: donations to the food bank and toy drives. We shout out holiday spirit with turkey dinners and Christmas parties. And generally speaking, we do a pretty good job of heralding these good tidings: the good tidings that this is the season for giving and for getting together with family and friends.

But what about the good tidings of God's rescue and salvation? What about the good news of God's arrival on earth, about the fact that the God of the cosmos has chosen to make his home with people – with you and with me? What about the good tidings that God has poured himself out on humanity so that everyone everywhere would know that God hasn't abandoned his people? Who is up on the mountaintop proclaiming the most significant event in world history isn't stuck in the past but is here and now with us in this moment at this time? Who is proclaiming that the release for the captives is here? Who is proclaiming that the highway out of the desert is ready for us to walk out on? Who is proclaiming that the same Word that set the stars in space and formed the earth and the seas and populated them all with all kinds of creatures and life forms has come to live with us and to share the love and life of God with us. What about proclaiming *those* good tidings?

We, the church, the body of Christ the Word made flesh, are the ones proclaiming these good tidings! We proclaim these good tidings whenever we recognize that God is present with us and among us. We proclaim this good news whenever we choose to be reconciled to one another rather than divided, whenever we offer an embrace in the spirit of peace, and whenever we sit down to eat with one

another, sharing in fellowship with one another in the same way that Father, Son, and Spirit share fellowship among themselves in self-giving love.

Those are Good Tidings worth shouting about, and the church is the herald of the Word-made-flesh and must shout out louder and stronger than all those other voices in our culture that would have us holler out a lesser message of sentimental, generic holiday spirit.

Lift up your voice, O herald of good tidings. Do not fear. Do not fear. Like the Israelites of Isaiah's day, we too live in a world governed by fear and anxiety. Like then, even now there is a lot to be afraid of in the world: war, injustice, pain, torture, suffering, being lost or alone, never going home again, the destruction of homes, cities, livelihoods, and the murder of children. Lots to be afraid of.

There is also the fear associated with the fact that the most holy, most powerful being that exists has decided to intervene in the affairs of the world. A certain amount of fear and trembling is to be expected.

But Isaiah commands, "do not fear". When Zechariah was afraid of the angelic appearance, or when Mary and Joseph were terrified at their situation, the angel of the Lord came to them and gave them hope – "do not fear." When the shepherds were suddenly accosted by an unprecedented visitation of the heavenly host, "do not fear" offered them comfort in the midst of their terror.

God's command to not be afraid are words of grace and hope. If God were coming with wrath and judgment, we should indeed be very, very afraid. But instead, God meets us in the weakness and limitations of our humanity, he experiences what we experience, he extends his love to us as one of us – the Word made flesh. He comes as both the Mighty God and the Prince of Peace. He comes as our wonderful counselor and the Good Shepherd.

We 'hear' this word of hope when we act with confidence in God's love and grace for us, instead of withdrawing into ourselves in order to keep ourselves safe. We hear when we step out and step up with courage for the sake of the Word. We hear when we are faithful in difficult situations rather than being immobilized by the fear of repercussions. We show the world that we trust in the goodness of God and are not a fearful people when we lift up our voices with strength to proclaim that God's coming among us is cause for celebration, not for fear; for God is putting the world right in and through his eternal Word, Jesus the Christ, born for us as one of us.

Lift up your voices. Do not fear. Behold, your God! Look! Here! Behold! God is here! Right here and right now. In this moment and in this place. This is the cry that comes to us from the manger. God has returned to his people, there is no longer any need to fear, so shout it out for all to hear – God is here! He isn't "out there" somewhere. He isn't sleeping. He isn't sitting back in some inaccessible heaven directing the cosmic drama.

And the God who is here is the same God who brought order out of chaos and who dispelled the darkness with Light. He is the God who has always been the loving communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, giving themselves to one another in self-sacrificing love.

"Behold, your God" – this is the basic reality of the good tidings we proclaim. Our salvation has arrived, because God is here.

Yesterday, Randy and I had the opportunity to look after the kids who live next door. They are great kids and we had a wonderful day. But I remember the look on little Reyse's face (he's 2) when his mom left for the day. Anxiety, fear, sadness, "don't go mommy". You have all seen that look on a child before.

But toward the end of the day when he knew mom was coming back, he sat on the back of the couch looking out the window, eagerly expecting her to walk up the steps at any moment. And when she finally did, he jumped up and down on the couch with glee, and then rushed to the door, shouting 'mommy, mommy'. His face showed uninhibited, unhindered delight. He was whole again. Everything was right in the world again.

We all know that there is something to be said for being childlike when it comes to faith. None of us are whole without the presence of God. The world isn't right without the presence of God. Things aren't the way they are supposed to be without the presence of God. And here we are just three days away from Christmas, sitting on the back of the couch, eyes fixed on the front path, waiting for the Word to come and make everything right again, to make us whole again. Waiting to lift up our voices without fear and proclaim, Behold, our God!

So, today, **lift up your voice with strength.**

Psalm 98:4–9 (NRSV)

- ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
⁹ at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Joy to the Word, # 153 vv. 1, 3, 4

Lift up your voice with strength. **Do not fear.** Lift it up.

Luke 2:8–20 (NRSV)

- ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.
⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and

lying in a manger.”¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Angels from the Realms, # 146 vv.1, 2, 5

Lift up your voice. Do not fear. Lift it up with strength. **Behold, your God!**

Revelation 5:6–10 (NRSV)

⁶ Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸ When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰ you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

Hark the Herald # 139

Benediction:

Minister: Jesus is the Word made flesh in our midst.

May his coming fill your hearts with joy and peace.

People: O Lord, give us peace.

Minister: Jesus is the promised Saviour, born of Mary.

May his birth among us renew your hope.

People: O Lord, give us hope.

Minister: Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

May the gift of his presence bring forth rejoicing.

People: O Lord, give us joy.

Minister: Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Bless you now and forever.

All: Amen.