

“Going Up”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 10, 2023

2nd Sunday of Advent

Psalm 85:8-13

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Isaiah 40:1-11

During this season of Advent – this time of anticipation and preparation for the coming of Jesus, our Lord – we are focusing on the message of the prophets. Last Sunday, we listened to the voice of Isaiah pleading for God to come down from heaven and meet us here on earth; to be with us as one of us.

The story of Christmas describes the greatest gift ever given, as God descends from on high to be incarnate – flesh and blood – among us. God assumes human form so that we might more fully see, hear, and understand the divine message of good news. God’s love for us is made manifest through the birth of a Savior given for us; this is Immanuel – God with us.

This morning, we return to the prophet Isaiah to hear God speaking to the people of Israel at a particular time in their history. Their generations-long period of exile has ended; the penalty has been paid, the term is complete. Now is the dawn of something new: “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,” Isaiah says, “and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (v. 5)

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” (v. 1) In response to God’s gift of this new beginning, the people are urged to take action. Care for each other; listen attentively to their pain; bind their wounds; lift them up; to comfort can literally mean to turn around, to think in a different way, to have one’s mind changed. No longer are they in exile; no longer separated from their holy city and its Temple. God has lifted the valleys and lowered the mountains so that the people might travel home on a level highway.¹

But this command to provide comfort does not stand alone. “Speak...cry,” (v. 2) the prophet also says to the people, “Cry out!” (v. 6), “Get you up...lift your voice...lift it up.” (v. 9) The appropriate response to receiving God’s gift is not

¹ Anathea Porter-Young from *WorkingPreacher.com*

simply a quiet acceptance – not just to feel comfort – but get up and speak. Climb a high mountain, Isaiah says to the people; lift up your voice and cry out.

What might this say about how, today, we anticipate and prepare to God's greatest gift? In what ways could this amazing story of the incarnation – God in heaven coming down to earth and taking on human form as a baby born in a stable – change the way we think and, thus, how we act to comfort one another?

I think we do this by using the best of our God-given gifts to proclaim the message. All of us have gifts – whether public and conventional, or behind-the-scenes and unexpected. This morning, we will use music the power of music to lift up this story of Emmanuel and shout it out. Next Sunday, it will be the gifts of hospitality and fellowship as we sit together around tables. Because the people of this congregation employ their gifts, we can also provide hats, mittens, and pajamas for neighbors in need. We support students and their families both here in our building and thousands of miles away in Liberia. The donations offered to Pass-It-On will allow for presents on Christmas morning when otherwise none would have been possible and previously homeless families to transition to housing furnished by Humble Design. In each of these ways, we tell this Christmas story of God's giving by offering our own gifts to others.

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald to good tidings, lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (v. 9)

God comes down; the greatest gift we could ever receive. We go up, offering whatever gift we have to offer. In doing so – by comforting God's people, by lifting up our voices, by modeling our lives after the One who came as one of us to reveal God's love, compassion, peace, and justice to us – we say to this often troubled and doubting world – to people of every faith or searching for any faith: “Here is your God.”

Blessings to all as we anticipate and prepare for his coming. Amen.