Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 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.

3 A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 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.

5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

6 A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of 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!'

10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

11 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.

Reading the Prophet This Week

The lectionary takes us back a step this week,
From Isaiah 64 last week to Isaiah 40 this week,
A more familiar text from 'Second Isaiah'

We recognize these phrases
From Handel's Messiah, echoed by the symphony Saturday
From several favorite seasonal hymns

We mostly know it from John the Baptizer's intro in the gospels
which tempts us to reduce it to a prediction of Jesus,
Now fulfilled and obsolete, having served its function

God forbid that we slide into that easy Anti-Semitism
That Judaism is obsolete, superseded by Christianity
(and in turn by Islam, Bahai, etc)

Better to try to hear it as prophecy not prediction,
Naming the shape of things, types in every age/place
But originally framed in exile in Babylon

The original prophet Isaiah was deported to Babylon,
Part of the first wave of elite exiles
This oracle is voiced from exile,
directed back to Jerusalem
implicit audiences in diaspora,
and now including us

Enjoy the lament and hope
Shifting from the condemnations of c.1-39
The first generation Isaiah warning Judah

We in our liberal subculture prefer mercy to judgement
A God of love to a God of justice
And Isaiah 40 is a sweet spot for us

What's the original exile?
In what way are we in exile
Having paid our penalty?

What's the original vision of a highway?
What would it mean
To make a highway in the desert?

What's the original glory?
What's the glory to be seen by all people
Cry? What?

Mortal limits of people,
Divine promise
Then as now

From Jerusalem to cities of Judah?
From whence to whither?

What's the promise,
To Whom,
Of what?

And who is included,
Or excluded,
In your reading?

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news
of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

4John the baptizer
appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming
a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins.

5And people from the whole Judean countryside
and all the people of Jerusalem
were going out to him,
and were baptized by him
in the river Jordan,
confessing their sins.

6Now John was clothed with camel's hair,
with a leather belt around his waist,
and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7He proclaimed,
'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.

8I have baptized you with water;
but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Reading the Gospel this Week

As I pointed out last week on 'hereticslikeus.com',
Mark doesn't have Christmas (or Easter appearances)
No baby Jesus!

As I added this week on 'hereticslikeus.com',
Mark's *koinē* Greek diction is rushed, crude, blunt
Bam: start Jesus with John burst on the scene

Again, as in my Isaiah note above –
I don't think this is a one-time mid 500's BCE promise,
'come true' in Jesus, thus obsolete

Mark doesn't even use Matthew's formula
"thus was fulfilled'
Just 'as it is written'
Inviting typological reading

Where was John's wilderness
From which he came to the Jordan
To baptize 'all the people'?

His appearance keys on Elijah and Elisha symbols
Northern prophets in Israel in the time of Ahab
8 centuries before Jesus, according to 1 & 2 Kings

Attributed to John is the proclamation of a successor
Whose person and baptism will be more powerful
(sure enough, we get Jesus in v9)

This gospel doesn't think you need Christmas
It frames John succinctly in 2 Hebrew scripture frames,
From Isaiah and from Kings

Who or what are we left expecting, in this Advent season
The gospel to complement and rise above John the baptizer's?