

## A Prophetic Prelude

12/10/2023

Rev. Daein Park

Gary was in a meeting at church one day and had a disagreement with Pastor Kim, the pastor of his church. He went home feeling uncomfortable. The next morning, Pastor Kim called him, saying he could not express himself well as a non-native English speaker. Gary also wanted to spend some time with the pastor to repair their relationship, so he invited him to his home.

After a while, Pastor Kim rang the bell, and Gary went out to greet him. A few moments later, as Gary came in looking puzzled, his wife, Audrey, who was coming out to the living room with coffee and cookies, asked, “Why are you coming in alone?” Gary said, “The pastor just left.” Assuming that Gary, who wasn’t usually known for his warmth, must have said something offensive, Audrey chastised her husband, “You must have said something to the pastor with that stern look on your face again.” “Of course, I wasn’t smiling,” Gary said with a look of exasperation, “but all I did was tell the pastor to make himself comfortable in our house.” “Really?” “Yes, I just said to him, ‘Make yourself at home!’ and he went back...”

We gather here in the worship venue on the second Sunday of Advent with hearts filled with anticipation. This sacred time invites us to reflect on the past, to embrace the present, and to prepare for the glorious arrival of our Savior. Just as Gary invited Pastor Kim to make himself at home, the Scriptures call us to make ourselves ready for the Lord’s arrival.

This preparation is not just about outward appearances but about opening our hearts and minds to receive God’s message. When we have a guest, we may prepare ourselves with a clean home, a delicious dish, or warm welcoming words and smiles. Even the simplest gestures of welcoming can have a profound impact. In this season of Advent, we are called to do the same – to open our hearts and homes not just to human guests but to the divine presence of the Lord. In the words of Isaiah and Mark, we find a powerful guide for preparing ourselves for this holy encounter.

Last week, we explored the qualities of those who wait. Through faith, we are assured that our waiting will not be in vain. With this faith, we must prepare for the coming of the Lord. Throughout the Bible, there have always been people preparing for the work and ministry of the Lord. God raised up the Lord’s chosen ones for each time —

Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, Isaiah, Daniel, and others—to prepare and accomplish God’s works through them.

God had a plan to send the Son into the world to carry out God’s saving work. The Gospel of Matthew, believed to have been written with Jews as its primary audience, provides a genealogy of Old Testament times and describes a chronology of ‘preparers’ leading up to the birth of Christ through the history of Israel. In contrast, the Gospel of Mark is believed to have been written to bring the good news to Gentiles, including the Romans. Consequently, Mark avoids an account of Israel’s historical figures and begins his book with a simple but confident declaration: “This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Nevertheless, Mark’s author does not forget to introduce the preparer for the Messiah: John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was a man who prepared the way for Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark emphasizes that it had been prophesied through the prophets that someone would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. Although our text may imply that the prophet Isaiah made the prophecy alone, in reality, verse 2 quotes Malachi 3:1, which reads, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” The footnote in the NRSV suggests that some manuscripts read “in the prophets” instead of “in the prophet Isaiah.” Regardless, we should understand that our Lord esteemed the arrival of Christ so highly that God made preparations for it, and these preparations were fulfilled just as the prophecies of the prophets.

John the Baptist became a voice crying in the wilderness, just as the prophecies foretold. He didn’t choose a place with wealthy or intelligent people, such as a market or an academy; the wilderness was his place of life and ministry. What is a wilderness like? A wilderness is a land where everything is scarce. In the wilderness, it’s challenging to find food, drink, clothing, a place to rest, and even people to talk to. Shouting in the wilderness is lonely, frustrating, and even foolish. After all, yelling where there’s no one to hear will only hurt the yeller’s throat.

But nothing is as clear as the sound of the wilderness. In the wilderness, there are few other sounds to interrupt the voice of the speaker. In that land, you can’t hear the haggling of merchants, the debates of scholars, or the cries of animals — only the voice of the speaker. One might ask, who hears the voice? But the believers say, “Even if there is no one there, at least my God is listening!”

There are times when God leads us into the wilderness—a place of longing, yearning, and waiting. Many people are troubled by their needs and despair because they are not met quickly enough. But that's when we hear the voice of the wilderness prepared for us. The Bible is filled with God's words of comfort, encouragement, and promise for God's people who have wandered through the wilderness or whose lives have been like that. When we are in the wilderness, we can hear that voice more clearly, and when we cry out in the loneliness of the wilderness, our voice is heard by God.

Life in the wilderness also gives us the opportunity to expect and prepare for new things. Sometimes our experiences there allow us to discover an honest version of ourselves. Sometimes, it gives us understanding and insight into the challenges and difficulties others face in their lives. Still, other times it can help us discover God's plan for us. Through these processes, we can discern what we need to do for the sake of the kingdom of God and the coming of the Lord.

Whatever we do, it should contribute to peace as we comfort people. As we hear from the voice of Isaiah, God issues a compelling call to us, "Comfort, comfort my people." These words resonate with urgency and compassion. The Lord recognizes the weariness of God's people and extends a comforting hand, inviting them to find solace in the boundless love of the divine. This call to comfort is not merely a suggestion but a divine imperative, a response to the cries of a hurting and burdened people.

A lot has happened in the world we live in this year, and while we have some good news, the world is still plagued by crises, hazards, conflict, hatred, strife, division, deception, misunderstanding, and violence. Under the influence of these evils, many people in the world have lost their peace and tranquility and are crying out in the wilderness they have found themselves in. It is our job to comfort them with the peace of the Lord.

So, what must we do to fulfill this ministry of comfort? We are to place ourselves in the wilderness. We can reflect on our own experiences when we were in desperate need, conduct research, or contemplate the agonies of others to venture into the wilderness. In this environment, we can see and understand the life needs of those who are different from us. During this season of waiting and preparation, let us focus our hearts on a specific group of people who are struggling, pray for them, and share the Lord's comfort with them.

For instance, consider individuals in desperate need of wealth, health, safety, friends, love, or anything else that comes to mind—perhaps even one very specific person. We can earnestly pray for them during this season, and extend a gesture of giving or performing even the smallest word or act of comfort. When we do this, when we make a small voice in the wilderness, it will become ‘a prophetic prelude’ to prepare the way of the Lord.

This season of Advent invites us to place ourselves in the wilderness, where we can see and understand the life needs of those who are different from us. Let us set our hearts on a particular group of people who are struggling, pray for them, and share the Lord’s comfort with them. As we wait for the coming of Christ, let us remember the compelling call of comfort, and our voice of hope in the wilderness will prepare the way for the Lord with our love and compassion.

Remember, even the smallest word or act of comfort can have a profound impact and become ‘a prophetic prelude’ to prepare the way of the Lord. In this season of Advent, let us go forth and comfort the world, one small act of kindness at a time. Amen.