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**A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, 2008**  
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**Christ Church + Washington Parish**

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ...”

*But scripture also teaches us that God is ceaseless in calling us back. Part of the comfort of Isaiah's words is that no matter how weak or fleeting our faith and our resolve, God is constantly faithful, infinitely resolved, that we should be with God.*

So begins Mark's Gospel, probably the oldest of the four accounts of this “good news” about Jesus. But for Mark, the good news doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus, as Matthew's Gospel does, or with the birth of John the Baptist, like Luke's Gospel. No, for Mark the story begins about 550 years before the birth of John or Jesus, with the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. For Mark, the story of God's mightiest act of salvation began a long time before the main event.

Now John's Gospel starts the story even earlier, before time began, in fact, and you'll get to hear more about that if you come to worship on Christmas Day, but for today, let's think a bit more about what Isaiah's ancient words have to do with the good news about Jesus.

The passage from Isaiah that Mark quotes is, not by coincidence, part of our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures today. That reading is also a beginning in a way. Scholars think that the book of Isaiah is actually three books, accounts of three different prophets who lived at different times but who got lumped together because their words had similar themes.

Anyway, chapter 40 begins the second of these three books, written near the end of the Babylonian captivity, the era when most of the Palestinian Jews were captured, enslaved, and exiled to Babylon. Be comforted, second Isaiah's message begins, for your captivity is almost at an end, and, unlike your captivity in Egypt which ended in forty years of wandering through the desert, this time the road back to Jerusalem will be a straight and level highway through the wilderness.

It's not surprising that Mark and the first-century Jewish community for whom he is writing would find resonance in Isaiah's words. Mark is also speaking to a captive people, conquered by Rome and living under a brutal authority, although this time held captive in their own land. But the parallel between Roman and Babylonian conquerors was made achingly clear when the Romans, like the Babylonians, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem just as Mark was writing his gospel.

So Mark's account of the good news of Jesus, told to a people in the extremes of fear and oppression, makes a parallel claim to Isaiah's of comfort to the distressed because God is at hand and ready to act on their behalf. The good news, then, is not new at all, but the perpetual story of God's people forgetting their dependence on God, turning away from God and suffering because of it, and being saved by God.

It is a story we hear over and over in scripture, not just in the accounts of the wayward tribes of Israel, but in individual lives in the Bible as well. People turn aside from God and, in the biblical phrase, "do what is not right in the eyes of the Lord." God calls on them to return, and if they repent, they are restored to good fortune.

And this, I daresay, is most of our story as well. We wander, drift and turn, sometimes heeding God and knowing ourselves to be very close to God; at other times turning away because unhappiness tests our faith, because the charms of the material world, or of sensual pleasure, or of power lure us in the wrong direction, or because, sometimes, faith just seems like too much work. And then, after wandering around in the wilderness for a while, something calls us to turn around, and if we do, we suddenly realize we were heading in the wrong direction.

And that is why we observe four weeks of waiting at the beginning of the church year. The beginning of the good news for us, as for second Isaiah and for Mark, is not in the climactic appearance of God in our midst. The beginning of the good news is in the voice that calls us to turn around and be ready. Before we celebrate Christmas, we spend some time listening for that voice, remembering the voices that have called our ancestors to turn around, so that we may better enable ourselves to hear when we are spoken to.

One of the lessons of scripture is that the call is ongoing. Isaiah and Mark and John the Baptist are only a few of the many voices that are continually calling humankind to pay attention to God, to turn from the paths and choices and actions that separate us from God, to see what God has done, is doing, and will do for us out of love. And scripture teaches us that the road to repentance is not yet that straight highway through the wilderness. We succeed and we fail, we heed and we ignore, we come close and we wander away all the time, individually and collectively, as people, families, church, nation, in all that we do.

But scripture also teaches us that God is ceaseless in calling us back. Part of the comfort of Isaiah's words is that no matter how weak or fleeting our faith and our resolve, God is constantly faithful, infinitely resolved, that we should be with God.

And so, in the end, scripture teaches us an even more important thing about the continual call to repentance that is our burden and our gift: whenever you do listen to whatever voice is calling to you – whenever you do stop and turn away from the angers, or vanities, or selfishness, or weariness, or whatever is drawing you further from God – when you do turn around, you will discover that God has been with you every step of your wanderings. No matter how you felt, you were never far from God.

Emmanuel, "God with us," is one of the prophetic names of Jesus. But it is also the reality that scripture tries to teach us: that God was and is and will be with us no matter where in the wilderness we wander, to the end of our lives and beyond.

And that is the *end* of the good news about Jesus Christ.

Amen.