

Sermon Dec. 7, 2014 Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8 “Unlikely Messengers”

Things could not be worse, the woman thought... It was cold, the electricity was shut off, the bag of food the mother had received at Social Services had only one box of Jello in it now. She had had a ten dollar bill, but her fourteen year old had stolen it last night, for drugs... And when her eleven year-old came in with some kind of electronic thing, she panicked, because she knew he could not have bought it. The weight in her chest got heavier as worry consumed her... Nothing seemed fair, nothing seemed possible... It was a dark time where she felt powerless. No money, no heat, no power to keep her children off drugs or away from crime.

To people as desperate as the woman in the dark apartment, God’s hope is given: “Comfort, comfort my people... Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill brought down...He will tend his flock like a shepherd and gather them together with his arm; he will carry his lambs in his bosom and lead the ewes to water.” Hope. The care of the Shepherd... Safety and enough to eat, even clean water to drink... Hope in the midst of a scary and harsh world.

That’s what Christmas is about. That’s why the strange messenger, John the Baptist, walked out of the wilderness and challenged folks to wake up, to see that, even in their Roman-occupied powerless country, God was at work to save the whole world.

How does one catch the attention of the whole world, to speak a word of grace and hope and forgiveness and new life? A whisper...that’s what God did, God whispered God’s “I love you” through unlikely messengers, through folks like John, the son of old Elizabeth and Zechariah, childless for so many years and then proud parents only six months before teenaged relative Mary had her baby. One so old, one so young, both part of God’s whisper in this unlikely story. The whisper: Comfort, hope, the promise that we have a Shepherd, God, who is on the move to let us receive God’s heart as revealed through the birth, life, death, resurrection, and presence today of Jesus Christ.

Today, as our world spasms with fear and hatred and retaliation - with racism painfully revealed across our country, with Al Qaeda and ISIS apparently competing for world-wide attention, with people aimlessly walking the streets and living in the woods in our own town - we need the word that our Shepherd is at work today. All of us, young or old, are trying to hear that whisper of God’s love for our own lives.

Thomas Long, in his book, *Whispering the Lyrics*, shares a powerful story of an unlikely messenger.

“Many years ago in India, a group of men traveling through desolate country found a seriously wounded man lying beside the road. They carried him to the mission hospital some distance away and asked the doctor there if a bed was available for the man. The physician looked at the injured man and immediately saw that he was a member of the

warring Patau tribe. 'Bring him in,' he said. 'For *him* we have a bed,'

When the physician examined the man, he found that the man's eyes had been seriously injured and that his sight was imperiled. The man was desperate with fear and rage, pleading with the doctor to restore his sight so that he could find his attacker and extract retribution. 'I want revenge,' he screamed. 'I want to kill him! After that, I don't care whether I am blind for the rest of my life!'

The doctor told the man that he was in a Christian hospital, and that Jesus had come to show us how to love and forgive others, even to love and forgive our enemies. The man listened but was unmoved. He told the doctor that Jesus' words about forgiveness and love were nice but meaningless. Revenge was the only goal, vengeance the only reality. The doctor rose from his bedside, promising to return that evening to tell the man a story, a story about a person who took revenge.

When he returned that evening, the doctor began his story. Long ago, he recounted, the British government had sent a man to serve as envoy to this area, but as he traveled to his new post, he was attacked on the road by a hostile tribe, accused of espionage, and thrown in to a shabby makeshift prison. There was only one other prisoner, and the men suffered through their ordeal together. They were poorly clothed, badly fed, and treated cruelly by the guards.

Their only comfort was a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer*, which had been given to the envoy as a farewell gift by his sister in England. She had inscribed her name along with a message of good will on the first page. This book served the men not only as a source for their prayers, but also as a diary, a place to record their daily experiences. The margins of the prayer book became a journal of their anguish and their faith.

Those two prisoners were never heard from again. Their families and friends waited for news that never came; they simply vanished, leaving those who loved them in uncertain grief.

Some twenty years later, a man browsing through a secondhand book shop found the prayer book. After reading some of the journal entries in the margins, he realized its value and searched out the sister, whose name had been in the front. He sent her the book.

With deep heartache, she read each entry, learning the details of her brother's terrible ordeal. When she came to the last entry, it said simply that today we were taken from our cell, publicly flogged, and then forced to dig our own graves. I believe that tomorrow we will be executed.

At that moment, the woman knew what she must do. Her brother had died a cruel death

at the hands of torturers in a run-down jail, and this injustice must be addressed. She must exact revenge, *Christian* revenge.

She was not wealthy, the doctor continued, but the sister marshaled all the money she could and sent it to this hospital. Her instructions were that the money was to be used to keep a bed free at all times for a sick or wounded tribesman. This was to be her revenge for her brother's torture and death in this country.

The wounded man was quiet, silenced by this story of such strange revenge. 'My friend,' said the doctor, 'you are now lying in that bed. *Your care is her revenge.*'"

Unlikely messengers of good news, of forgiveness when it is most needed and least deserved, of God coming into a dark world with hope and help and surprising grace.

Prepare the way in you life so that God may become real for another person; by this God will become real for you. By so doing you will become one of the "unlikely messengers" through whom God continues to work in this world.

In the wilderness of our lives, we must prepare, for our Savior comes. He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart (Is. 40:11). Thank God that this "unlikely" story has been given for us! Amen.