

December 10, 2023
The Second Sunday in Advent
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada
\\S\B-25\Advent II_121023

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Maybe it's just me, but it seems to me that we talk a lot about God's promises, but the talk is usually in very general terms. Vague promises about living happily ever after in God's Kingdom, vague promises about the meek inheriting the earth, or what's left of it, and vague promises about sight to the blind, freedom to prisoners, and good news to the poor. How often, I wonder, have we considered the effect of those promises on our everyday life?

Today's readings are all about God's promises, and not a single one of them is vague. They're all quite concrete. Isaiah tells us, for example, that God tells us we have served our term of punishment. Not only that, but for every confession we make, we receive a double portion of grace (40:2). That means if we apologize for something we did this morning or may do tomorrow, we get double grace. Not a bad deal. There's a reason why Handel's oratorio *The Messiah* opens with those very words. They are spoken not just to the Jews held captive in Babylon, but to all people of all time. We are forgiven, and every future apology from us wins us double grace. Nothing vague about that.

Still, Isaiah says, "So what? We're all going to die anyway, so what's the big deal?" (40:6,7). God has a very specific answer: "Yup, you're just like the grass, here today and gone tomorrow, but My Word stands forever" (40:8). And if we know nothing else, we know that God's Word gives us life. "So here's what you do," says God: "Go up to a mountain and shout, 'Here is your God', because people need to know that God shows up for life." (40:10, 11 heavily paraphrased).

But we also have a part to play in all of this; we are not passive people receiving passive, vague promises from a passive, vague sort of God. Mark's Gospel opens with the same words we heard from Isaiah today. "Prepare the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:3). We don't sit around waiting for God to show up, we prepare our selves, our lives, and our worlds to receive the fullness of God, every day of our lives. Okay, that sounds a little vague, doesn't it? Today is all about being specific about God's promises and how they affect us. God's promises are made real by the people who trust those promises, who open their lives to the grace of those promises, and who look for the Hand of God at work everywhere in their lives. Still too vague? Then we consider what in our lives blocks our awareness of the presence of God. We look at the walls we may have built around ourselves and our lives and recognize the mountains that have to be leveled. We consider where hopelessness in our life has overcome God's own possibilities for us. Those are the valleys that have to be filled in and lifted up. We consider where our lives have become aimless; those are the crooked places that have to be made straight; where we allow the bumps and bruises of life to harden us; those are the rough places that must be made plain.

Isaiah tells us to prepare for the coming of God into our lives by removing all of the impediments that stand between us and God's mighty and healing Hand in our lives. No one is going to flatten those mountains and fill in those valleys for us; the task is deeply personal and belongs to us alone. The reward for all of that work is the promise of forgiveness of past sins, a double portion of grace with each new confession and absolution, and the presence of God walking with us every step of our lives, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Nothing vague about that. The promises are real, specific, and beneficial, but the paths that must be made straight are not one-way paths; they are two-way paths. We do the raising, leveling, and straightening; God does the rest.