

SERMON TITLE: "Good Tidings"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 40:1-11
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 2, 2018, at First UMC—1st Sunday of Advent

INTRODUCTION

A week ago, my husband Steve and I went to see the Ballet West performance of the Nutcracker. Even though that storied ballet is a Christmas classic, somehow I had gotten to my ripe old age without ever having seen it before. The dancers were so athletic and graceful, the costumes and staging were really beautiful, and we enjoyed the performance a lot.

As far as Christmas stories go, however, I'm not sure the Nutcracker comes anywhere close to my favorite Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Even though I've seen that heart-warming movie *dozens* of times, it still evokes tears from me as the Jimmy Stewart character, George Bailey, goes through his many different emotions and contemplates suicide before he arrives at the happy ending of Christmas love and joy.

If I had little kids in my house, another classic that I'd be looking forward to this season would be the *Charlie Brown Christmas*. Even though I haven't seen it in quite a few years, I can still fondly remember the sadly-shaped tree and Linus' ever-important line: "I bring you good tidings of great joy."

Of course, Linus' classic words didn't originate with the Charlie Brown gang. That precious line comes from the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke, when the angels told the shepherds about the birth of baby Jesus. But really, even in Luke, the words of the angels weren't entirely original. Their heavenly chorus was an echo of classic words from centuries before, when the Jewish people had been living through some pretty tough times and the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed to them a message of hope. Because this proclamation has persevered as a classic for the ages, let's dig into Isaiah 40 and see what the prophet meant by "good tidings."

1—FORGIVENESS OF GOD

According to Isaiah 40, the good tidings begin with the forgiveness of God. In verses one and two, Isaiah indicates that the penalty for sins had been paid in double. No more punishment was needed. Now was the time for tender comfort.

Unfortunately, people of every age, race, and religion have known the crippling effects of sin. Sadly, people of every time and place have known the bondage of punishment and hard times. The Jewish people of Isaiah's day were no different. They believed that God had exiled them to Babylon because of all the wrong that they had done. But, fortunately, the Prophet Isaiah offered the belief that his people had suffered enough. Whatever they might have done wrong, God was ready and willing for them to move on. The good news was that they didn't have to keep on wallowing in guilt.

Today, we're blessed to know about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—which brought a new level of clarity to Isaiah's message about God's desire to offer forgiveness. But, even back in Isaiah's day, five centuries before Jesus' birth, the prophet announced that redemptive salvation was available for those who would receive it. Don't be sad, he said. Don't be discouraged or stuck. Don't wallow in despair. Instead, lift up your chin, and regain hope. Experience the good tidings of the forgiveness of God.

2—ACCESSIBILITY OF GOD

The second point in Isaiah's good tidings is the accessibility of God. You don't have to use a walker, wheelchair, or crutches to know that it's a lot easier to get into a building that's all on one level. Everyone is able to participate in a congregation that allows and welcomes those who are differently abled.

In verses three through five, Isaiah was saying something similar about our relationship with God. When the valleys and mountains are leveled out and the highways are made straight, you don't have to own an expensive four-wheel drive truck to climb your way to holiness. When the rough and uneven places are turned into a plain, everyone is able to see the glory of God. This good news of salvation is not just for the privileged or healthy, the young or the financially-stable, the beautiful or the bright, the first-world or

the powerful. The glory of God is revealed to all humankind, so everyone can see it together. God is accessible to the blind and the lame, the poor and the weak, the marginalized and the outcast.

In the United Methodist Church, we say that our hearts, our minds, our doors—and our communion tables—are always open. *No one* is excluded from divine grace and love. That's accessibility. That's the way God is. And that's good tidings.

3—RELIABILITY OF GOD'S WORD

In verse eight, we hear a third point in Isaiah's message of good tidings: the reliability of God's word. There's a saying that the only things certain in life are death and taxes. Well, death and taxes may be reliable, but God's word is even more certain. And God's word is a whole lot more positive. We put so much hope and energy into preserving our lives, which are as fleeting as the grass and flowers of the fields. But what really lasts is the word of God, which stands forever.

Now, some folks might interpret this verse to mean that every word and phrase from the Bible will stand for eternity. I seriously doubt that's what the Prophet Isaiah meant, and I certainly don't mean that myself. As good as our Holy Book is, there are just some things in it that don't stand the test of time.

For example, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, the Apostle Paul taught that—while praying, women should cover their heads and men should not. That's one of the reasons why women used to wear hats and veils to church. And that's why many men today still observe the tradition of taking off their hats for times of prayer and worship. But who among us today really thinks that God cares all that much about whether or not someone is wearing a hat? Or who believes that a Bible verse about hats and scarves is an eternal truth?

In that same chapter of 1 Corinthians 11, Paul also wrote that for a woman not to have a head covering was as "disgraceful" as having her head shaved, and that, for a woman, even cutting her hair is disgraceful. Hmmm. Here, just recently, two very good women that we know and love shaved their heads in a very sacrificial and righteous cause to raise money for the Youth Mission Trip. So, I have to think

that, while—back in Corinth, 2000 years ago—there might have been some very good reason for the Apostle Paul to be making judgments about the length of women’s hair, probably his instruction doesn’t apply so much today.

Those are just a couple examples of why I don’t believe that that kind of biblical literalism is what Isaiah meant by the word of God standing forever. I believe Isaiah was referring to the timeless truths that God is love, and that God offers hope to all the children of the world. I believe that the word of God that stands forever is the big picture stuff of forgiveness and life transformation. I believe that the word of God that stands forever is the admonition to worship our creator with every ounce of our beings and to love our neighbor as ourselves. I believe that the word of God that stands forever is the incredible hope and light that come to us in the darkest valleys of life and death. And *that* word of God, I believe, is trustworthy for all eternity. There are a lot of passing fads and gimmicks. There are even a lot of very miraculous things—including life itself—that don’t last very long. But the good tidings of Isaiah remind us that, while other things come and go, we can always rely on the foundational truths of the word of God.

4—PRESENCE OF GOD

Like the word of God, God himself is reliable. And that brings us to a fourth point in Isaiah’s proclamation of good tidings: the presence of God. We who are Christians believe in the very good news what happened on Christmas morning, when God came to live with us, as baby Jesus. But even before Jesus was born, God was present with the people. We see this in verse nine, where God tells the prophet and the Jewish people as a whole: “Lift up your voice with strength, . . . lift it up and do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

I love the Advent-Christmas song “Emmanuel, Emmanuel” that reminds us that God is with us, revealed in and through Jesus. But Jesus’ birth wasn’t a correction to God’s absence in earlier times. God was always present. What was new with Jesus’ birth was that Jesus was able to focus the world’s attention. While looking at Jesus, we are somehow more able to understand that God is serious about this business of

living with us and among us. In Jesus' ministry of healing the sick and reaching out to the disenfranchised, he demonstrated the ancient truth that God has always been present in the world with power and might. By referring to himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus picked up the imagery of Isaiah 40:11. He highlighted the ancient prophet's words that God has always been busy in the world, tending the flock like a shepherd, gently leading the mother sheep.

Over the next few weeks, as we read and act out the Christmas story, we will hear the wonderful proclamation from angels, shepherds, and wise men that Jesus is God-with-us in the world. But even before we get to the Christmas story, we hear the Old Testament prophet shouting, "Look! God is here!" We hear Isaiah describing the classic good tidings of the presence of God.

CONCLUSION

It can be a joke or real life. You know the set up. Someone says, "I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?" Then you have to choose. Would you like to begin on a sour note and then have it sweetened? Or would you prefer to be cheered up first, so you have the courage to face the disappointment?

Well, the really good news that I have for you today is that there is no bad news. According to Isaiah 40, when we accept the forgiveness of God, we get credit for time served. No more punishment or suffering is necessary. The way is clear; God is accessible to us no matter what kind of handicaps and limitations we may have. Even while other things are passing away or going out of fashion, we can trust in the reliability of God's word. And, best of all, we know God is here; we are encouraged and empowered by the presence of God. This is the always-relevant, classic message of Isaiah 40. As we begin this Advent season, may we hear and believe God's good tidings.