

## DECEMBER 12 WORSHIP SERVICE

PEACE PRAYER – MEGAN, CAMBRY, AND DELANEY DUERKSEN

O God, in this Advent season, we pray that your peace may come to our world.

Bless us as your beloved sons and daughters, that we might be peacemakers, people who prepare a way, who straighten the road, who level out the rough spots. Help us to lift our voices to injustice, to love mercy and to walk humbly.

Bless us as your beloved sons and daughters that we might support peacemakers, people who are struggling to make their voices heard, to tell their story, to find their place in your world. Help us to listen carefully, to understand deeply.

Bless us as your beloved sons and daughters that we might teach peacemakers, people who are learning to walk in your ways and be your disciples. Make us generous and wise in giving them the tools they need.

Bless us as your beloved sons and daughters that we might love peacemakers, people who might seem very different than us but who, perhaps have great courage and a willingness to sacrifice. Help us to hear their ideas and grasp their vision.

Bless us as your beloved sons and daughters that we might reflect your peacemaking light into the world. We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Creator God, we begin with gratitude. In the midst of uncertainty, illness, fear and division, let us first bring to mind gratitude. We are grateful for life and breath, for relationships that offer deep love and trust, for this earth, this garden that you created and gave to humanity for our care enjoyment and care. We are grateful, God, for your love for us and all of your creation. We're grateful that you sent Jesus, the infant born to immigrants in poverty, during a time of great political upheaval – in the midst of uncertainty, fear and division. You were present with your people then, God, and you are present with your people now. And we are grateful for your presence and your love.

We bring you our prayers, God. We pray for those who are facing health issues or medical treatments in the coming days. For some these are physical health issues and treatments, for some, there are mental health issues that need to be tended. O God, you have created us and we are fearfully and wonderfully made – we are whole, integrated beings and our physical, mental, spiritual, emotional health is all part of what makes us human. We pray for your healing, God, in all the ways we need it.

We pray for those who work in the medical world – continue to give them stamina and resilience, wisdom and expertise. Give them health and healing as well as they work under brutal and staggering conditions with unprecedented numbers of sick and dying.

We pray for those who are feeling loss and loneliness in these days. We pray especially for the family and friends of Ira Don Schroeder whose graveside service we had yesterday afternoon. We pray for others who are grieving the loss of loved ones, the loss of traditions, of plans for the holidays that have had to be altered or postponed. We pray for those who are feeling the stresses of major life changes, for older people whose days might seem long and who struggle to find meaning, for students and teachers who are trying to wrap up this first semester of the school year. We pray especially for young people who may be struggling with school, with relationships, with trying to figure out who they are during these strange and difficult times.

And IN these strange and difficult times, we are grateful for technology – for the ways we can keep in touch with one another, the ways we can continue to worship together – even though we're apart! And we thank you for people who are gifted and skilled in this area, willing to give their time and know-how, to make it possible for us to be together on our computer screens. We thank you for Delton and Steve, for Pastor Caleb and the hours they've given to our congregation.

We thank you, God, for Janice Funk Voth, for successful surgery and for the days of recovery that she's had at home. We pray for continued restoration and health for her. We thank you for Rod Peters, that he was able to receive a new knee and go home all in the same day! Thank you for the recovery and rehab that he has already experienced and we pray for on-going healing for him. We thank you for the healing that Beth Yoder has experienced, for your presence with Beth and Caleb and their boys through this time of quarantine – we are grateful to have Pastor Caleb back, with us in the sanctuary this morning and we pray for the on-going health of him and his family.

Be with us now as we continue to worship and praise you, to hear the words of scripture, to absorb the message that you have for us through the hymn texts, and especially through Caleb's message. Bless him as he preaches, bless us as we listen and engage with your word, through your Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### OFFERING PRAYER

Son of God, in the darkness of winter when we wonder where you are, give us eyes to see the stars shine in the darkest night sky.

Remind us that you come to us in the form of a child.

May we find you in the little corners of our lives and in the humble people in which you dwell.

Let that serve as the invitation to offer You our humble gifts – Giver of life and all that is good.

Accept our humble gifts and multiply them.

Accept our humble hearts and make them ready to receive Christ.

Accept our humble lives and transform them,  
that we might live in the power of the resurrection, willing to risk all for your Kingdom.

#### COMFORT AND PEACE IN HARD TIMES – PASTOR CALEB

Isaiah 40:1-11

In the part of Iowa where I'm from the landscape is rolling, kind of like the hills between the church and Hillsboro. It usually isn't so hilly to prevent straight roads. Sometimes these roads follow the landscape pretty well, but often earthmovers cut into the hills and evened out the surface, particularly for paved roads.

The road that goes by my parent's house, where I grew up, was not paved when my dad was a kid, and much more up and down. When they paved it, it made a gradual descent as you go east.

This was thanks to the fact that the paved road cut through a section of rolling terrain. Only as an adult, did it every occur to me to notice the landscape and think about what the hill would have originally looked like.

Another example, is the highway as you go east from Marion toward Hwy 50. You go over a hill, but much smoother than the actual terrain.

I've seen more dramatic examples in other countries, such as this picture from Ecuador, where they cut right into the mountain side, filled in a valley, but even in spite of that, the road winds back and forth.

If all our roads were to disintegrate, I imagine it would take thousands of years before natural forces would remove evidence of terrain reshaped by humans.

Now remembering proclamation of Isaiah of a highway that is straight, with valleys raised and mountains made low, this would be a pretty major road construction.

The words I read from Isaiah were originally addressed to a specific situation. If you listened in last week, you may remember that I talked about two different times that the city of Jerusalem fell to enemies. The first of these happened when the Babylonian Empire conquered the land of Israel and demolished much of Jerusalem after a brutal siege.

The Babylonians had a strategy to devastate the nations they conquered. They captured at least the more connected segment of the population – those with wealth, education, or political power – so that it would be impossible for the subjugated country to revolt. We could compare this to the way the United States forcefully exiled many indigenous peoples from their original lands to reservations.

This is what the Babylonians did to the nation of Judah. A significant segment was exiled to Babylon and lived far from home for about 70 years.

Earlier Jared played *“O Come O Come, Immanuel,”* which addresses the exile: *“O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.”*

Isaiah 40 has words that originally addressed the exiles that were in Babylon, many who were born there and had no memory of Israel.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

The Hebrew word for “comfort” is the same one that in another verb tense appears when God *has compassion*, or *relents* from bringing promised punishment.

This means that God is ready to extend forgiveness and restoration to God’s people. The prophets understood the exile as punishment for the idolatry and social injustice of their nation, and now after that suffering comes the word of comfort.

Scholars believe that what we actually have in Isaiah 40 is a peak inside the divine throne room, just as Isaiah the prophet experienced when he was called. In chapter 40, we don’t really hear the perspective of any prophet, but instead just the voices that are overheard in God’s throne room. God declares comfort for Jerusalem to the angels or celestial beings that are with God.

Different voices speak. One of them cries:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.”*

This voice is apparently one of the other celestial beings, and the meaning is that the God of Israel is about to return to Jerusalem, with the exiles following behind.

There is a huge desert that separates the land from Israel from Babylon – in fact the Babylonians would have come by way of what is called the fertile crescent rather than the straight through the desert.

The point of the image is that the God of Israel is coming back to Jerusalem! It’s a thing worth celebrating, and we gotta build a good road for God to come on.

As the different voices in God’s throne room speak, another one adds some depressing realism:

All people are like grass or like wildflowers. We don’t really last very long. Only God and God’s Word are forever.

Growing up, the road through the rolling hills that took us to the nearest town of Wellman passed a sign that someone put up with verse 8: *“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”*

Certainly, the experience in exile was very humbling for the people of Judah and was a lesson in human fragility. The coronavirus pandemic is the most recent lesson of how fragile we are.

But this depressing realism extends to empires too: the successive empires of Assyria, Babylon, Media, Persia, and so on all blossomed and flourished for a time, then were replaced by another.

I'm sure it felt to the exiles like their God was dead, but precisely the opposite is true. Now is the time for Jerusalem to celebrate the good news. It's good news that is a precursor to the good news that Jesus will bring a few centuries later in God's story.

When God comes on this highway, it is a restoration of peace and wholeness for God's broken people. As we loosely follow the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, it is not hard to connect this promise with a vision of peace.

A few chapters later in Isaiah, we have similar words: *"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"* (52:7).

Likewise, if you turn the opposite direction in Isaiah, you see it in chapter 35:

*5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
6 Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert....  
8 And a highway will be there;  
it will be called the Way of Holiness;  
it will be for those who walk on that Way.* (35:5-6, 8)

As a matter of fact, the exiles did return to Judah and Jerusalem after the Persians took over from the Babylonians. The promises were fulfilled – in a sense.

Last week, I noted that the prophets often proclaimed promises fulfilled in human history in the same breath as the ultimate promise of God's victory over evil and the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness.

Isaiah 40 is one of those passages with a living Word that found one kind of fulfillment when the exiles returned, but found a deeper fulfillment in the coming of Christ.

Just as the people of Judah found full forgiveness after a hard season in exile, so we find forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another through Jesus Christ.

Each of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John quote at least a snippet of Isaiah 40, as they tell the story of John the Baptist who began a renewal movement just before Jesus began his ministry.

John drew inspiration from Isaiah for his movement. When people asked, he answered *“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”* (John 1:23).

When John finally meets Jesus in person, he exclaims, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 NRSV). If you read Isaiah 40 at the same time, you see a parallel with the exclamation “Here is your God!” in verse 9, when God returns to Jerusalem.

This is the hard season of waiting for Christ, making space in our hearts to receive Christ as if for the first time. What peace are we waiting for? Many of us are wondering what kind of peace can we hope for to sustain us through this especially dark winter.

You might be thinking about simply having an end to this pandemic that is getting old – whether or not you worry about someone you’re close to getting seriously ill, and especially if you are. We are grappling with how to still be able to celebrate Christmas in this hard year.

We long for healing from the political polarization that divides communities, and in some cases families.

We wonder what the way forward will look like for the church if things return to a closer-to-normal.

Instead of doing nothing, let’s join in preparing the way, making a highway with a smooth grade in our lives as we again anticipate the coming of Christ.

How might we do that? My thoughts come in three areas: “loving our neighbors,” having a hopeful vision for the future, and celebrating the light of Christ that already shines in the darkness.

In this unique time, loving our neighbors means wearing a mask any time you are in proximity with someone not in your household or bubble. Experts are saying these will be dark months, and we can make them less dark by our actions.

We want to keep hospital beds open for those neighbors who may need them.

Many people are feeling isolated, and any way we can be in touch and encourage one another – at a safe distance – will go a long ways these next few months.

Most of all, we need to be attentive to our own well-being in order to be there for others. If emotions overwhelm you, find a way to care for yourself – maybe that’s taking a walk on a sunny day, or breathing deeply, offering simple prayers with each breath.

We also begin dreaming about what our lives or what our church might look like when the pandemic is over. Whenever it becomes safe to worship and do activities as we did before March, we will be indelibly changed from who we were a year earlier.

We may celebrate and lament. We may take up familiar routines or embrace some permanent change. We'll think about the goodness of this strange past year and decide to keep certain aspects. We may have new insight on how God is calling us to minister.

Finally, this is a season of celebrating the light of Christ that shines in our darkness. Let's not compromise that spirit of celebration, no matter what we have to alter to stay safe. There's an opportunity to embrace some creativity.

Extended family gatherings like normal may be out – but what about coordinating meal times and connecting virtually while eating? Or maybe it's time to bundle up and meet outside with masks if we keep having calm sunny days.

Take comfort in the promise of God's peace and restoration. Take comfort in the promise of forgiveness. May God give us each a vision and an energy to make the rough ground level, to raise up valleys and bring down mountains. Let us lift up those who are discouraged or hurting with the good news.

#### BENEDICTION

People of God... prepare the way of the Lord! Go now, attuned to the Holy Spirit, making space for the light of the world!