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The Second Sunday in Advent  
December 7, 2008  
Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-3

*"The Voice at the Beginning"*  
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Even in our highly visual age where we are surrounded and sometimes bombarded by images and pictures, just a voice by itself can get our attention in a hurry. It might be the plaintive cry of a child in the night calling, "Mommy." It might be the familiar voice on the telephone of a friend that you have not seen in years that brings back a flood of memories. Isn't it remarkable how we can recognize the voice of someone and recognize who they are with no visual cues at all? It might be the voice of a radio announcer that instantly quiets a room with the simple words, "We interrupt this program for a news bulletin ...". A voice can be very powerful. It can command our attention. It is therefore fitting that this morning the Old Testament Lesson and the Gospel focus our attention on a voice. It is a special and significant voice. It is indeed the Advent voice that is calling to each of us. On the basis of these Scriptures we will consider our theme, "The Voice at the Beginning" and join in the prayer that the Lord would truly prepare us for His coming again as we look forward to the season of Christmas which approaches swiftly.

I. The Voice

In the Old Testament lesson from the 40th chapter of Isaiah it is the voice which is most emphasized. Three times the prophet mentions the voice. "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.'" (v.3) "A voice says, 'Cry out.'" (v.6.) "You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout ... 'Here is your God!'" (v.9) Just a voice, but what a message that voice had to proclaim. The Lord is coming. Prepare His way. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. And this highway project would make every human road work pale in insignificance. For every valley will be raised up and every mountain and hill made low ... This is not an exaggeration for the way of the Lord must be prepared in all the world that all mankind together may see it.

And again the voice cries out, "All flesh is like grass and all their glory like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." All of the things in life that we see as important will fade away, but the one sure thing remains, the true and faithful word of our God. The voice calls us to the sure foundation of the word of God.

And the third time the voice calls, "Behold! your God. The Lord almighty comes with power and his recompense accompanies him." Now to many the image of the coming of the Lord in his glory would cause fear and trembling. For who indeed can abide the day of His coming and who will stand when he appears? Yet the coming of the Lord is not something which should inspire fear. For there is comfort in the text as well. Indeed its first words are

words of consolation: "Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ..."

## II. The Voice at the Beginning

There is another reason as well why the voice is one we need not fear for it is the "voice at the beginning" as the Gospel lesson for today makes clear: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ... 'The voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord ...'" (Mark 1:1,3) We learn from the New Testament who the voice is. It was a voice with a remarkable story all its own but also a voice that kept the attention away from itself as it pointed to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Indeed let the voice itself speak in answer to the question who he is, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (John 1:23) He was merely the Forerunner, who pointed the way. As John said, "He must increase, I must decrease." John the Baptist was the Advent voice and he pointed to Jesus. That was John's purpose as he came to preach repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God. That was the message that the throngs heard as they came out to him in the desert to be with him. And it truly was the voice at the beginning, the beginning of the good news, for the voice would turn our attention to him who would in the words of the Old Testament lesson, feed his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs in his arms and carry them close to his heart. For the Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd is the one to whom we are called, and the one who will come again in glory. At His second great Advent He will gather all His sheep into His arms where they shall be safe and secure forevermore. This is the one to whom the voice at the beginning pointed. This is the message of Advent.

## III. The Voice Still Needs to Be Heard

And the voice that was heard at the beginning still needs to be heard today. It needs to be heard in a world that is still full of sorrow and sickness, fear and death. It needs to be heard in all the nations of the world. I was thinking about this the other day when I thought of the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai (Bombay) India. Commentators wrote that it was the target of the terrorists because of all the places in India, Mumbai is the center of what we would call Western business and culture to a great extent. It is the center of the booming film industry of that country. And the terrorists, the Islamic terrorists, hate and fear the things of the West and so they strike out against it. Yet what is so tragic about that situation is that though India is adopting many of the cultural trappings and the business model and the lifestyle of the West, it has not adopted the religion of the West. The faith of Christianity has been separated from the culture in which it grew up. At one time the Christian faith enlightened and molded the culture in which it thrived—but sadly that is no longer the case.

That is of course not just true of India, it is true of much of what was once Christian civilization. The churches of Europe are mostly empty. The people long to be fed. And in our own land, we can say the same thing. For a few years there has been a battle over

Christmas. Now while I have not heard quite as much about it this year as in years past, it is true that there are many people who would like us to celebrate the holidays without really understanding the main event.

Of course, the irony in that is that the merchants want to take advantage of Christmas and have people spend lots of money while on the other hand they do not want to recognize the basis of the day. And that is probably upsetting a lot of Christians who are wondering what is happening to Christmas. On the other hand, what is celebrated as Christmas is very often a far cry from the observance of the birth of Christ. Don't be surprised at what is happening. In the book of Revelation the world throws a party and exchanges presents at the death of the two witnesses to the truth of God. The world would like nothing better than to celebrate Christmas without Christ. This year as well, it is really tragic that it seems to be that the only reason for this season is to spend lots of money to keep the economy from collapsing even further. What a misrepresentation of Christmas it has become. What a worship of the idol of godless Mammon the celebration of the birth of the Son of God has been turned into.

That is why the message of repentance and turning away from sin will not necessarily be a popular message. The people of the world would like to ignore it. But it is not a time to despair for the people of God. For the victory is there. The voice is still crying. It cried out in the days of the prophecy of Isaiah, it cried out in the ministry of the John the Baptist. It cries out today in the unchanging word of the Lord. The church must get the message out because so many need to listen. "Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." "All flesh is grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field ... The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of the Lord endures forever." "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms." "I am the Good Shepherd and I lay down my life for the sheep." "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life, and they will never perish." Listen to the voice at the beginning. For the voice at the beginning points us to the voice of the Son of God Himself. For it is the voice that will speak until the last day: "Prepare the way for the Lord."

### Conclusion

In all of the hubbub leading up to Christmas, sometimes it is hard to hear that voice. But even the commercialism of the season cannot hide it fully. It is even present in the music we hear in the malls, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." Yes the Advent voice still calls. And we the baptized children of God who know that voice and who believe its promises need to share the same joy, the same assurance and love with those who do not know and who see only the darkness. For the light of the world shines in our hearts for the world to see. It is the light of the knowledge of the love of God in the face of Christ Jesus, our Savior.

On Jordan's bank, the Baptist's cry  
Announces that the Lord is nigh  
Awake and hearken for he brings,  
Glad tidings from the King of Kings.

All praise, Eternal Son to thee  
Whose Advent sets thy people free  
Whom with the Father, we adore,  
and Holy Spirit evermore.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.