

**The Lessons Appointed
for Use on
Second Sunday of Advent**



Year B
RCL

Isaiah 40:1-5
2 Peter 3:8-15a

The Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you

and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-5

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.

A voice cries out:

“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;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his prom-

ise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

SERMON

I'm not comfortable being Debbie Downer, church, but we are living through harrowing times and we need to understand where we are, not only in relationship to our present world, but in relationship to God and His purposes. This will be my poor attempt to do that.

I used the word “harrowing” on purpose. “Harrow” is a word out of its time. It was once common enough, but now sounds sort of antique. When we speak of harrowing we mean to drag a harrow over a field to break up the ground and level it, just as Isaiah suggested.

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;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

That sounds pretty unpleasant when we apply it to our world, but remember, when a farmer harrows his field, he is making the ground ready and level for what will come next. Harrowing is a natural process to prepare the world for God's design.

Naturally enough, we don't like the sound of that, and ache to reply, "Oh that sounds wonderful, but if it's all the same to you, I'm good, just as I am" then turn our thoughts to more pleasant topics. Not so fast there.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Who wants to deal with that? I certainly don't, but our Epistle for today promises a new world beyond, and counsels us to anticipate its coming. I do not feel that we are doing so. I think we are too attached to the world

as it is, flawed though it may be, and are unwilling to make the sacrifices needed to embrace this new world.

Hence the need for a harrow.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German pastor, theologian, and martyr was asked in 1943 how it was possible for the Church to sit back and let Hitler seize absolute power. Bonhoeffer neither flinched nor dissembled. His firm answer was, “It was the teaching of cheap grace.” Imagine how THAT went down. He is laying the blame for the holocaust at the feet of the church!

“Cheap grace”, he said, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

“Cheap grace” is easy religion. Cheap grace requires

that we honor the traditions of the church, but asks no personal sacrifice, and no real response to the pain and suffering which inflict our world. We live in a time and culture that not only teaches cheap grace but praises it, church. We have allowed human suffering to be expressed in easily ignored, anonymous data. Two thousand nine hundred Americans died from Covid on Thursday. Hearing this data, do you see even a single human face, or is it just numbers to you? Look at this:



Those are wedding bands removed from the fingers of Jews murdered by the Nazis. Do you not see human faces now? Do you see married couples walking to their deaths rubbing the place on their hand where their wedding rings were? Look again at those wedding bands, each one a family that is no more. Lest you think that was then, we're better than that now, note that the President, as we speak, is rushing five executions to completion by the end of his term. Rushing them! He sees no faces in his hurry. He needs victims to sate his ego. He seemingly cannot bear the thought of leaving office without taking life. Many support him. Is this the Creation God planned? Does this represent God's design? Is it not so that our world is in need of harrowing to bring forth a worthy crop?

What of this harrowing? Is it God's judgment? Are we of our time being judged unworthy and plowed un-

der? I can't think so. I look at history and don't think we're the worst of a bad lot. I think we are living in a time of preparation. The farmer with his harrow bears no animus toward the leavings of the present harvest; His eye is ever on the coming harvest. We shall be harrowed from hope, not from anger.

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

It is that need for repentance which should hold our focus.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

It's bad now, even though we try not to take notice of it, but there is a new world, one in which righteousness is at home, awaiting us and we are promised that until that time, we, each of us, can behave as though we had already inherited that which is promised. It is within our power to decide what sort of a world we live in and to work toward it.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

I look around my beloved community, home to me for more than 74 years, and I see something I never would have seen as a child. I see churches up for sale. I see the lovely church behind Parsons, now a law office. I see churches which once were filled with families and children now sparsely filled, mostly with people of our age.

Where I saw life and leadership as a child, I now see fond memories and patient waiting. Can such actions harrow the field for the new world? The horror that crosses my mind is that Bonhoeffer may have been speaking to us as well as to the people of his time. Have we preached cheap grace? Has a world starving for the peace that passeth all understanding found our teaching wanting and walked away from our churches? Have we been satisfied with preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession? Have we settled for grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ?

It is Advent at the end of one of the most horrific years of memory. It is time and past time that we must turn our eyes from worship of what-has-always-been to-

ward that-which-is-promised and ready ourselves for
the coming of Christ.

AMEN

Apostle's Creed

*I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven
and earth;*

*And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our
Lord,*

*Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.*

He descended into hell;

The third day he rose again from the dead;

*He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand
of God the Father Almighty;*

*From thence he shall come to judge the quick and
the dead.*

I believe in the Holy Ghost;

*I believe in the holy catholic church, the commu-
nion of saints;*

The forgiveness of sin;

The resurrection of the body:

And the life everlasting. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Walter Cronkite once said, “It’s amazing how we spend so much time inventing devices to kill each other and so little time working on how to achieve peace.”

Live your life in the new world, church. Treasure the laughter of children. Speak with kindness. Speak with love and see with eyes of hope. Rejoice! For the harrow cometh.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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