

Isaiah 40:1-5 ; Mark 1:1-8

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[0 : 0 0] It's pretty cool to receive a message from God, but it's way more cool to receive a visit from God. Now, last Sunday morning, we spent a little time considering a message from God to us, but also to be delivered by us. We find that at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 40. We'll just remind ourselves this is the message from God to us, but also to be delivered by us.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand, double for all her sins. This morning, we want to explore what Isaiah has to say about a visit from God. The picture painted by the voice spoken of there in verse 3, a voice of one calling. The picture painted is of a royal visit. That is the scene that is being presented. Those who would have first read the words of Isaiah would immediately have had in their mind's eye this picture of a procession where a king visits. A king comes in all his splendor. And this is the picture that is being painted here.

And given that a king is about to come, there is, as we can understand and appreciate, preparations that need to be made for his arrival, for the journey that the king is about to make.

And what we want to do this morning is to just give some thought, identify a few aspects of this royal visit that the verses we've read speak of. And the different aspects of this visit that we want to think about is, first of all, to consider the identity of the king. Who is this king who is about to come?

Who is this king who is going to be the head of this royal visit? So, the identity of the king. Then, very briefly, we're going to think about the announcement of his coming. In a way, that would make sense to be the first thing. But I want to start off just identifying who it is that is coming.

[2 : 3 9] Then, just very briefly, think about this announcement for his coming. And then, really, the heart of the matter, as far as Isaiah is concerned in these verses, relates to the preparations that are to be made for his arrival. How are we to prepare for his coming? I think there's another aspect that we can find here, and that is a promise that is given. It's not presented in the language of a promise. It's not perhaps explicitly a promise, but I think there is implicitly a promise in these verses.

I'm talking about verses 3 to 5 of Isaiah 40. And then, finally, we'll notice the outcome that will be secured by this visit that is anticipated in these words. So, let's make our way through the passage in that way, verses 3 to 5 of Isaiah 40. First of all, the identity of the King. Now, in the passage, the voice who is not identified is very explicit. A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord. It's very clear who is coming. It's the Lord. The word there in Hebrew translated Lord is that personal name of God, if we want to use that language, that God revealed to Moses. Yahweh.

I am that I am. He is coming. He is the King who is coming. It's His arrival that is being announced.

And then, again, if there were any doubt, and there really would be no reason for there to be any doubt, but if there were, Isaiah goes on, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. So, it's clear in the passage here. It may not be clear when He's coming or what He's coming to do, but it's clear that the one who is coming, the one whose arrival is being announced, is the Lord, Jehovah, Yahweh, our God, our God, the Almighty God. God Almighty, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, is coming to town. The God who revealed or explained His divine name, Yahweh, to Moses, is approaching. This is a big deal. As I was thinking about important visitors, I brought to mind an occasion several years ago when I was involved in organizing the visit of the British ambassador in Lima, in Peru, to the town where we were living in Moyabamba, which is a very small town out in a very rural part of the country. And the British ambassador was coming to participate in the graduating ceremony of the school that as a church we had set up and were running. So, this was a big deal for us, that the British ambassador would be coming to visit our little school in our little town. And as I say, at the time we were very excited and thought it was a big deal. But, you know, that visit, important though it seemed to us at the time, that the time was nothing, nothing in comparison to what Isaiah is speaking about here. He's speaking about God coming to town. Indeed, even, you know, suggesting or even making mention of the visit of that ambassador several years ago is almost impertinent. There's hardly no point of comparison.

You know, this is a huge deal that Isaiah is anticipating. God is coming to town is what he is announcing. So, the voice there in verse 3, a voice of one calling, the voice is clear and explicit.

[6 : 39] But we can and we must explore a little further in the light of how this passage is employed in the New Testament and especially in the Gospels. As I was mentioning and introducing our reading in Mark's Gospel, all four Gospel writers identify the voice of verse 3 as John the Baptist and then go on to identify the one coming. We can listen to John himself speaking as his words are recorded by John.

So, we read from Mark, but we're now going to read from John's Gospel, John chapter 1 and from verse 23. And so, the passage we're going to read is a passage where John himself, John the Baptist, is speaking and identifying himself and identifying the one who he is preparing the way for. So, John chapter 1, verse 23, John replied, that's John the Baptist, replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet. So, very explicit way he's drawing what he is saying from. I am the voice of one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord. Now, some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?

I baptize with water, John replied. But among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. This all happened at Bethany in the other side of the Jordan where John was baptizing. And then notice the next verse. The next day, John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And so here, John the Baptist, identified by all four evangelists as the voice, himself identifies the one who is coming as Jesus. Now, we're so familiar, or perhaps many of us are so familiar with this identification of Jesus as being the one being spoken of in Isaiah that we can lose a sense of how huge this is. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all clearly, unreservedly, and unanimously identify Jesus.

The man Jesus, the man from Galilee, the man born in Bethlehem, they identify Jesus as the Lord, as Yahweh, as our God. It's huge that these Jews would be so bold as to identify Jesus as Yahweh. But they do so clearly and unequivocally on different occasions, but very particularly here in the passage that we're giving thought to. Jesus is God. That's the claim. You may believe it, or you may not believe it, but that's the claim. And it is a bold claim. Jesus is God, and God in the person of Jesus is coming to town.

[9 : 59] We just backtracked for a moment to last week. We heard the message of comfort that consisted in our return from exile, our sins being paid for, our lives enjoying double or ample blessing from God.

But how will all this come about? That's the question. Well, what Isaiah is saying is that God will come and make it happen, and He will do so, He has done so, in the person of Jesus.

And that's the question. He will do so. He will do so. He will do so. He will do so. Because it's so important for you to be persuaded of that. Our God is a God who delivers. He is faithful.

If He promises comfort, He delivers comfort. If He promises forgiveness, He delivers forgiveness. If He promises salvation, He delivers salvation. You can rely on Him. I'll let you down. Family members will let you down. Your needless and dearest will let you down. You will let them down. But God delivers on His promises. So, the identity of the King. Who is coming to town?

The Lord, our God. Jesus is coming to town. This is what Isaiah is anticipating. So, the identity of the King. But let's move on and think about the announcement of His coming. So, Isaiah 40, verse 3, a voice of one calling. Now, just very briefly, a couple of things to say about this announcement.

[11 : 38] Listen. It seems that the sense of this expression, a voice of one calling, is along the lines of, of listen. A voice is about to speak. The idea is that those who are hearing would listen up, would pay careful attention to what is about to be said. Listen to this voice that is a message that it is important for you to hear. And if it was true when this was first spoken so long ago, it remains true today. Listen to what God has to say about this visit, this royal visit that He Himself is making. So, the encouragement is to listen carefully. But the announcement also speaks of the route that will be taken by the King. This is a route or journey marked by all manner of obstacles. In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. The environment is hostile, desert environment, it's wilderness, and the obstacles are many. But notice also what is seemingly missing from the announcement from the announcement. What you would expect in the announcement of a royal visit, what is missing is a timescale, a date, even an approximate date for when this is going to happen.

Isaiah says nothing in that regard, at least not at this juncture. When will this visit take place? Now, the absence of a timescale perhaps does carry one implication, and that is that people can't postpone their preparation until the date approaches. You see, if you don't know when He's coming, then you've got to be ready. If you know, you might say, oh, well, I'll leave things. I'll leave things till nearer the time. But no time, no explicit time is given. You just simply need to be ready. Now, we know in the light of the New Testament that in the fullness of time, this visit took place with the coming of Jesus some 2,000 years ago. But there is a real sense in which the reality of God's desire and disposition to visit sinners, that would be you and me, is a permanent one. That desire, that will to do so is a continuing will and desire. He would visit you, and you must make preparations.

Which leads us on to that third aspect of this visit, what we're calling the preparations to be made. And we find reference to that in verses 3 and 4. In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Well, particularly in verse 3. We'll move on to verse 4 just in a moment. Back to my story about the visit of the British ambassador to Moyabamba, you know, whenever it was, many years ago. I was responsible for that, or in some measure. And I remember there were a host of matters that needed to be attended to in preparation for his coming. There were the coordinations with the embassy in Lima about his travel arrangements, about the protocol of his coming, preparations with the local police about an escort for him, security from the airport to his ultimate destination, preparation with the local authorities. There needed to be some civil reception for such an important guest. Suitable accommodation had to be found. His itinerary had to be established.

And of course, at the heart of it, he was visiting our school. So, we had to give the school a lick of paint, at least those parts of the school that he was going to see. Those that he wasn't going to see, well, they could be left shabby. We didn't have a budget for the whole school, just the parts he was going to see.

Well, what about the preparations for the coming of God in the person of his son, King Jesus? Well, I think there are two matters to note in regard to this question of preparations. Who are responsible for the preparation?

[16 : 05] And what, or in what, do the preparations consist? Well, who are responsible for preparing the way? Well, at one level, the voice is responsible. And indeed, Mark identifies John the Baptist as having this responsibility of preparing the way. Notice what we read there. We've already read this, but we'll just remind ourselves of what we read in Mark chapter 1. The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way. So, there very explicitly, and those words actually are from Malachi, and there's a drawing together, a verse from Malachi and the verse from Isaiah. But the verse from Malachi identifies John the Baptist himself as the one responsible for preparing the way. But of course, it's not just John the Baptist, because his message is to the people, prepare the way. The people also are involved. It's not John the Baptist by himself. He prepares by delivering the message, and then the people prepare by listening to the message and paying heed to the message. So, all are involved, really, in the preparations. But perhaps more importantly, in what do the preparations consist?

Well, in Isaiah, it's picture language, and it's the picture language of preparing a highway. In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

But what does that mean? Well, who better to answer the question than the one identified as the voice, John the Baptist? How did John the Baptist prepare the way for Jesus? Well, we've read what John said, or what is said of him, there in Mark chapter 1. We won't reread those verses.

But we can draw out two key elements of how the people are urged to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. And the two key elements are a call to repentance and a pointing to Jesus. You know, we could summarize John's message in these two elements, John the Baptist's message. There's a call to repentance and there's a pointing to Jesus. John preached, we've read there in Mark's Gospel, he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Key to preparation then was and is now an acknowledgement of guilt and a seeking of forgiveness. Nothing has changed. If God, in the person of Jesus is to come into your life, the preparation that you need to make involves acknowledging your sin and guilt and turning to God in repentance and for forgiveness. Preparation for the coming of God does not involve trying to be good, but recognizing that you're bad. Now, for those of you who are obsessed with this, I'm going to indulge you, there are 64 sleeps till Christmas. Some of you groan, some of you smile, some of you excited. I don't know how you respond to that. Startling fact, 64 sleeps till Christmas. Not that I'm counting. And Santa Claus is coming to town. Now, how are children urged to prepare for the coming of Santa? Well, you know the words of the song. You better watch out.

You better not cry. You better not pout. I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town. He's making a list and checking it twice. Gonna find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is coming to town. Now, preparation for the coming of Santa, so it seems, is all about being naughty or nice. Are you good enough to welcome Santa and to receive a present from him? Amazingly and tragically, many seem to think much the same with regard to the coming of Jesus. It's all about trying to be good, about giving our lives a lick of paint to cover up the cracks. But nothing could be further from the truth. For the coming of Jesus, the preparation is not being good, but recognizing that you're bad, recognizing that you're a sinner.

[20 : 48] Nobody is nice enough to deserve a visit, and nobody is too nasty to be denied a visit. All need to repent and ask for forgiveness. This is the preparation that is required for the coming of Jesus.

And so, in this message of preparation, John the Baptist calls men and women to repentance. But he does so together and it's all joined, you know, joined indissolubly, is that as well as calling to repentance, he points his audience to Jesus. John was always at pains to stress, it's not about me. Look to Jesus.

Jesus. Then in Mark chapter 1 and in verse 7, he says, after me will come one more powerful than I. And he's speaking about Jesus. In the chapter or the passage in John that we read, he sees Jesus and he says, behold, see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He points to Jesus. It's the same today.

He says, hey, my task as a messenger, my sole task as a voice is to point you to Jesus. And your sole task is to look to Jesus. I point you, you look. I give you the call to repentance, you repent.

This is the preparation that is required. But we can move on to the penultimate aspect that we want to just note. And that is the promise that is given. And here I'm thinking about what we read in verse 4.

[22 : 33] In verse 4, it follows on really from verse 3 in terms of the picture of this way in the desert. And we read, every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places, a plain. Now, why am I calling that a promise? In Isaiah's picture that we've just read of the coming of the Lord, there is this remarkable description of how the highway would be prepared for His coming. But the question that emerges from this picture is this, who is able to perform such a task? You know, to lay the valleys low, the mountains, the rugged places becoming a plain.

This is a work of civil engineering that is beyond the capacity of those who are being given this task to perform. Who is able to do what is being described? I think the significant thing is that verse 4, grammatically if you wish, is not or at the very least need not be understood as a continuation of the command in verse 3. In verse 3, there's a command directed to the likes of you and me. In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Something that we need to do. We've seen in the light of John the Baptist's ministry that that involves us in repenting and looking to Jesus. But what we read in verse 4, though very much intimately connected, is more a description of what will happen rather than a command that we are expected to perform or to obey.

You see, you could just imagine Isaiah's first audience protesting, but we can't do that. It's impossible what you ask of us. The obstacles that need to be removed in order to make a straight highway are beyond the capacity of those awaiting the visit of the King. And what is God's response? What is God's promise if you wish? It is simply this, I'll do it for you. I'll do it for you. You acknowledge your need.

You acknowledge your sin. You acknowledge that you need me to come and visit you and rescue you. And I'll level the highway. I'll make the path straight for you. And we know that in the fullness of time in redemptive history, that is what God did. God became flesh. He became a man in Jesus that he might make that journey from heaven into our sin-sick world. He came down to us because we could never make it up to him. We couldn't even prepare the highway for him to come on towards us.

And it's no different today in the experience of those who recognize their guilt and sin, repent and turn to Jesus. Jesus removes all the obstacles. He removes the obstacle of your guilt and sin. He removes the obstacle of God's just judgment hanging over you. He removes the obstacle of your alienation from God. He removes all the obstacles in his atoning death on the cross in your place. He makes the path straight that he might come to you. This is the promise that is implicit in what is described there in verse 4. But there's this final aspect that I want to just highlight of this royal visit, and that is the outcome that is secured. And we read of that in verse 5, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. How are we to understand this anticipated outcome? For Isaiah, it's an anticipated outcome. Well, this happened in the coming and saving mission of Jesus.

[26 : 47] It's interesting in Luke's account, we've already looked at Mark's account and John's account. In Luke's account of John the Baptist being identified with the voice of verse 3, there's a very revealing detail.

Let me just read the words that we find in Luke's Gospel. I'm not going to give you the reference because I haven't noted it down here, but I do have the words on my bit of paper so I can read them. There's a wee task for you to see if you can find where in Luke's Gospel this is. But trust me, this is from Luke's Gospel.

And I'll just read what it says. It says, And notice the last thing that is said in Luke's account.

And all mankind will see God's salvation. It's interesting. It doesn't say God's glory. All mankind will see God's salvation. So what is Luke acknowledging? What's his take on it? He's saying God's glory is seen in His salvation. This is how we see God's glory in the person of Jesus and in the saving work of Jesus. The glory of God is revealed. And so in the coming of Jesus, we see God's glory. We know, of course, that that is said very explicitly by John in the first chapter of his Gospel. You know, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory.

Glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. This is how we see the glory of God in the person of Jesus and in the saving work of Jesus. But that still leaves us with perhaps a question to pose. And the question is simply this. While we can acknowledge that God's glory is to be seen in the person of Jesus, is it the case that all mankind sees God's glory? This is what Isaiah is anticipating as the outcome of this visit and all mankind together will see it. Is that so?

[29 : 04] There's maybe a couple of things to say in that regard very briefly. I think one thing that we can say, and I think that is anticipated here or that allows us to understand that this idea of all mankind seeing. I think we do acknowledge that there is a further and ultimate fulfillment of what Isaiah is anticipating that still awaits. Listen to John in his vision in Revelation chapter 1 and verse 7 that describes the second coming of King Jesus. Look, He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him.

So, there is a day coming when everybody, in the fullest sense of that word, will see Him come. But I think another way we can understand this picture of all seeing the glory of God even though all, it would appear, don't see or certainly don't get it. I think the second thing that we can say in this regard is that the key is maybe to be found in words of Jesus addressed to Martha at the tomb of Lazarus. And Jesus asked Martha a question. This is before He performs His miracle of resurrection.

And the question that He posed to Martha was this, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? I think that unlocks, in a sense, the mystery.

You know, the glory has been revealed and yet everybody doesn't see. Why is that? Well, because you can see and not perceive. And so many, when Jesus came, didn't get it. They didn't see who He was.

He was there, the glory of God was being revealed in His person and in His work, and yet so many did not see. And I think Jesus explains why that is. If you believe, you will see the glory of God. The glory of God is there for all to see, but you can only see the glory through the eyes of faith.

[31 : 12] Let me just note one further outcome of this visit of the King that's not explicitly identified by Isaiah, but that I think is implicit in the language that he uses. What was the destination of the King?

Well, we noticed the environment that he was having to come through, and indeed the destination is a desert. It's a wilderness. In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord. And the picture of a desert or a wilderness is a picture that serves to describe the human condition, our dry and fruitless hearts and lives. But do those fruitless lives remain dry and fruitless following the coming of Jesus? By no means.

Jesus makes gardens and orchards bloom in the desert. He brings life and refreshment and fruitfulness to those He visits with His forgiving and transforming grace. And of course, that is then for the blessing of others. That fruit in His people and in His church serves to make visible the glory of God to all mankind, for all who would see. The King is coming to town. King Jesus has come to town, and He remains willing and able to come to you to bring forgiveness and new life. What must you do? All you must do, and all you can do is repent and believe and trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are a God who has come into this world. We thank you for the incarnation. We thank you for your Son, the eternal Son of God. We thank you for the manner in which He left the glory of heaven and all of the privileges that were His that He might come into this world, into this sin-sick world to rescue sinners such as we all are. And we thank you that He remains the one who is willing and able to come to our encounter to forgive and to rescue and to restore. And we pray that by your Spirit, you would help us to prepare the way and the measure that we are able as we would acknowledge our sin, acknowledge our need, repent of it, and look to you. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.