

RETURNING HOME<sup>1</sup>  
Isaiah 40: 1-11  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
December 7, 2008

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.* This familiar text, with its majestic King James cadences, greets us like an old friend every year during Advent. *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

Have you ever wondered how this text was selected for the opening of *Messiah*? Where does one start this magnificent story of Jesus? He chose to start with a word of comfort from a clear, tenor voice: *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.*

I

It is worthwhile to recognize how pervasive is that deep need for nothing less than a word of comfort, and how deeply our own world hungers for those words of divine comfort. We think of the many families who today (December 7) think of the devastating loss of life at Pearl Harbor, and still grieve after all these years. I think of an interview of a woman in Virginia whose husband and 13-year-old daughter were on the trip of a lifetime to India last week. They happened to be in the wrong

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place and at the wrong time, and they were among those killed by terrorists. When asked how she was doing, she said that she is taking it one minute at a time. Not one day at a time! A minute at a time! The quiet human suffering that goes on all around us and sometimes within us on a daily basis is enough to make even a strong person echo the words of the exiles: *Thou hast hidden thy face from us!*<sup>2</sup>

But look at the pronoun used in this text: *Comfort ye **my** people!* God had not forsaken them after all! They were still God's people, no matter how far they had traveled from home! That must have come as a shock to those who had written off God altogether, just as it must come as a shock today to those who wonder if God has written them off. Are you among those? Are you among the very ones who need a word of comfort spelling it out in clear terms: you are still God's child! God has not forsaken you, no matter what you have done or not done!

So the first word is a word of comfort.

## II

The second word is likewise important for this season. The word is *home*.+ It is implied in the text that says, *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight a highway for our God.* This was the

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 64: 7.

announcement of a divine highway construction program! And the highway was to lead them home.

Have you noticed that this highway is the *highway for our God*? This is not a picture of us searching for God, but of God coming to us! This is not a picture of our attempt to search for life's deepest meaning and accidentally stumbling upon God, but a picture of God taking the initiative and coming after us!

Home is an important word for Advent. Look out at any December congregation and one sees the gathering of familiar faces of young people home from college, wise relatives from east bearing gifts, and always, I think, exiles+come back to church. Some preachers make wise cracks about these lost sheep who wander back in from the cold every Christmastime. See you again at Easter,+they say with a grin.

But it's unwise to joke about their homecoming. What better time to come home to church? Have you been in exile? What voice has called you back? What recently smoothed road has beckoned you to the corner of Salisbury and Park in Worcester? These ancient words of scripture may take on new meaning if you hear them as words directed toward your life: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

That gnawing sense of yearning is about to be fulfilled! God is on the way, and our souls' memory of the divine is about to be revived! It may happen when we sing a carol, or when we light a candle in the darkness, or in a prayer, or in the embrace of an old friend. But God is on the move this season and is coming straight through the wilderness to take us home.

### III

And what better greeting at home than a meal on the table? Call it comfort food: *Comfort, comfort ye my people*. Get your knees up under the table; eat your fill; drink in all of God you can hold. This is a homecoming!

And what a time for comfort food! We have seen frozen banks, frozen lending, a stock market like a weary Phoenix that rises from the ashes and then plunges down again. With the economic woes as a global phenomenon, National Public Radio recently did a story on international comfort foods. They asked a German chef about comfort foods in Germany, and were told that it would be some jaeger schnitzel and sauerbraten, along with some dumplings and red cabbage.

With all the tragedy in India last week, there will likely be a lot of a dish called Dal, made of split peas and lentils, seasoned with cumin, chili, mustard seeds, onion and garlic. Dal and rice is a comfort food in India.

The Mexican choice was enfrijoladas, which are corn tortillas dipped in seasoned and pureed beans, drizzled with Mexican cream, and one of a number of salsas. That is Mexican comfort food, and it reportedly binds Mexican households together.

What is your comfort food? Many would say something like meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Some might even say fried spam! Have you heard how Spam sales have risen lately? Our church is becoming more international. It would be fascinating to have a discussion about comfort foods from our own native cultures.

But today, I invite you to come home to some Christian comfort food. Take this bread; take this wine. Eat, drink, and be comforted.