

November 27, 2016
Isaiah 40:1-5
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Tender and Fearless”

Good morning! I had an opportunity this Tuesday to see something both everyday and spectacular. It is by definition everyday, because it was a sunrise. It was spectacular because there was a sheer layer of clouds in the eastern sky, and I got to watch them turn from gray to blue to purple to pink to gold. It looked a lot like this **Slide 1** The other great thing about a November sunrise is that you don't have to get up that early in order to see it (!) That sunrise has stayed with me as an image of this season -- not just the season of late November and preparations for traveling, visiting, and a big meal, but of the season of Advent where we as sojourners and pilgrims in the kingdom of God stand on the threshold of a new year, peering ahead for the fulfillment of hope and promise.

Part of that reason that sunrise made me think of Advent is the colors: the deep blue becoming purple that is part of the panorama of the sky just before dawn. Closest to the sun, the purple turns to rose; a deep pink which is also part of the palette of Advent. It is not just these colors, it's what they represent: when we see these colors in the eastern sky, we know the light is coming and another day is about to begin. This day is unique: there will never be another one like it. But the sun comes up every day -- whether we notice it or not, whether we want it to or not, whether we hope for it or not. For a culture that didn't have electric lights--that means everybody prior to the 20th century and even some remote places in our world today -- darkness was a profound event, and not something you could do much about. Sunrise was when life started again. Psalm 130 says, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” That is the hope of this season; that our souls will feel the same sense of wonder and anticipation as

people in ages past looked toward the morning and the dawning of a new day. **Slide down**

For the next four weeks here at Creekside, we're going to be considering Christ for the Ages. This is Christ for the ages of time -- we know that Christ was with God in the work of creation before time began, and that Christ is the ruler of eternity, and will be Lord at the end of time. We're also considering what Christ might mean for us in different ages of our lives, beginning with the oldest among us and ending with the newborn Christ on Christmas Eve. I'd like us to focus today on the prophets and wisdom, and this passage from Isaiah, chapter 40. Wisdom, as you have probably discovered, doesn't necessarily go with age. It's possible to be old and not be wise. However, wisdom generally implies some kind of experience. Young people may think they know it all, but wisdom is more than just knowing a lot of facts: anyone with a smart phone and access to Google can find a lot of facts. Wisdom is something more complex than that: wisdom is a way of knowing that incorporates experience and perspective and acceptance. Wisdom is an ability to hold a variety of perspectives in an unanxious and unthreatened way, while still being confident of what is right and true. One of the marks of someone who is wise is that they will acknowledge there are plenty of things that they don't know -- and this doesn't throw them off balance or make them defensive. Wisdom doesn't have to win every argument or have the last word.

Our scripture text from Isaiah 40 may sound familiar to you -- it comes around nearly every Advent -- but I'd like to point out the character of the prophetic wisdom which is here. Verse 5 says, "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 made low." Part of the reason these words are familiar is that John the Baptist quotes this passage directly when he is proclaiming the coming of Christ, the Messiah. Composers from the 18th C, George Fredrick Handel in the oratorio *Messiah*, to the 20th C Steven Schwartz in the musical *Godspell*, have set these words to music. It's this kind of fearless proclamation that the Jewish people expected from their prophets: a wild man with uncut hair and an untrimmed beard wearing animal skins walking out of the desert and telling people that they'd better repent OR ELSE. These are the kind

of prophets who were sent to literally scare the hell out of people so that they would change their wicked ways.

God knows we have plenty of things in our lives and in our society which need to change. Most of us, frankly, are not that open to confrontational, in-your-face prophecy, at least when it's directed at us. We may want to see *those people* get what's coming to them, but prophets aren't always welcome at dinner parties or even in church pulpits. Fearless truth telling can get you fired from your job, and it can be tough on relationships. You'd better consider your answer carefully when someone you care about asks, "Does this outfit make me look fat?" Sometimes being fearless is just an excuse for being insensitive.

There is another aspect to prophecy in Isaiah 40; one which we don't always put together with being fearless. Listen to these verses which come immediately before the voice crying in the wilderness: "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." Isaiah was speaking to people from Jerusalem who had been deported, starved, exiled, and had their country occupied by Babylon. Their country was in shambles. They were in darkness and looking for light on the horizon. They were desperate and in need of hope. They were a lot like us. And into their darkness, Isaiah the prophet speaks tenderly: words of comfort and hope. I believe that this, too, is prophetic wisdom: to know when to speak tenderly and when to speak fearlessly.

Most of us are better at one or the other, because of personality or cultural expectations. Men may be taught that tenderness is weakness, and women may have gotten the message that fearlessness is too pushy or aggressive. How do we know what kind of speech God wants from us? I believe that Isaiah 40 gives us the answer: "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." When our words reveal the glory of God, then we are on the path to wisdom. Sometimes we may be called to fearlessly tell it like it is, and sometimes the answer that may reveal God's glory is a tender, "I don't know why this is happening, but I believe that God will never abandon you."

Because wisdom is not about us, it doesn't start or end with us. I find wisdom when I have spent years trying to live as God has called me, and I no longer need to impress other people with my knowledge or insight. I find wisdom when I accept that I am imperfect, and that God loves me completely. I find wisdom when I accept that you are imperfect -- sometimes in ways which I find annoying or destructive -- and God loves you completely, too. God's glory is not something I can manufacture or control, any more than I can make the sun rise in the morning: the best I can hope for is to witness it and help someone else to see it, too. I find wisdom when I know that seeing God's glory is enough to satisfy the longing of my soul.

I'd like to close with words from the apostle Paul about wisdom and maturity. This is from Ephesians 4:14 and 15: "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way in to him who is the head, into Christ." Wisdom requires both truth and love. None of us has it all figured out, but we live and strive in the hope of God's promise to the prophets of old, and the promise of those who embodied truth and love for us. Parents, grandparents, teachers, or outsiders who have allowed us to see and understand Christ in a richer and fuller way.

Brothers and sisters, especially those of you who have traveled further along the path to wisdom than I have, thank you for your guidance, your patience, and your love. May God grant us the fearlessness to speak the truth and the tenderness to speak with love so that each one of us grows in maturity in Christ. In this season when we watch for and long for Christ to be with us, may our words and actions show others the glory of the Lord. Come to us, O Wisdom of Christ.

And all God's people said: Amen!