

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:

““Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God. 2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from Jehovah’s hand Double for all her sins.” 3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of Jehovah; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; 5 The glory of Jehovah shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of Jehovah has spoken.” 6 The voice said, “Cry out!” And he said, “What shall I cry?” “All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of Jehovah blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.” 9 O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” 10 Behold, Jehovah God shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him. 11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.”

“God Comforts His People”

This year in the season of Advent where we remember the coming of Jesus, both in history and at the end of time, I have chosen to focus on some of the major characters given to us in the Christmas accounts. This week I would like to speak about Mary and so you might wonder, why I went with a passage from Isaiah as our morning text???

- **What I really want to do is speak about Mary, valleys and mountains!**

So why do I want to work valleys and mountains into the Christmas story?

- **Well they are mentioned in one of the most famous prophecies there in Isaiah & I suspect they are often misunderstood!**

It is only Matthew and Luke who give us details of the birth and young life of Jesus, but ALL four Gospel accounts have John the Baptist, the final prophet of the Old Covenant proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, just as Gabriel told Zacharias that he would. They all quote Isaiah where we read that John comes as: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low”

OK kids we need your help here with some proper Biblical interpretation... As we think about God’s glorious creation, do you think that He does not like valleys or mountains? Just think of Yosemite Valley with that beautiful valley surrounded by majestic cliffs and mountains! We must understand that Isaiah or John in his preaching are NOT talking about literal valleys or mountains!

- **They are being used symbolically just as the sun, moon and stars often are in Books like Isaiah or Revelation**

Of course then it is proper to ask just what is being pictured by valleys and mountains and just what does it have to do with Mary!?! By the end of my message, I trust we will be able to see clearly how the prophet’s use of valleys are referring to those in a humble state & the mountains are a picture of human pride!

These pictures of valleys being filled and mountains being made low could be applied to many aspects of God's great plan of salvation... The Spirit, as the Kingdom of Jesus fills the earth, will bring many humble or low nations up and He will take many proud or high nations down. We have seen this over time with various peoples and even churches.

- **BUT it also applies to us as individuals and it is here where I want us to focus today.**
- **Even young Mary, who is our example of someone God puts on the right path through faithful obedience, had God work on her valleys and mountains.**

Any consideration of Mary can be controversial in many protestant circles because they strongly reject how Rome and others have idolized her. But as we saw with the Church calendar last week, just because someone has gone off into one ditch, we must avoid the other ditch as well!

- **We must be sure that we present and believe what the Bible says about Mary:**
- **Nothing more and nothing less.**

When we look honestly at what the Bible reveals we see that she is like all of us with valleys that need to be filled in and some mountains that had to be made low. When we consider how God used her and how she responded we have important lessons for us all today and we should not fear to look to her as an example of faithful living.

First we must see that she is the mother of God, or more rightly as the Church fathers said, the God bearer. Now please note this is a far cry from what the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches say today regarding Mary. They stand near the end of a long erroneous road that began with a small wrong turn long ago...

- **A road that sadly has been well traveled down through church history causing many to stray far from the truth of the Gospel.**

And it is something we must understand since there are today many millions of Christians in these churches who we must of necessity deal with on an on-going basis, correcting them as we present the truth in love. We must learn, and challenge others, to present Mary as the Bible does:

- **She was a young virgin who was willing to be used of God to bear His Son.**
- **Mary was a mother willing to faithfully raise Him in her home.**
- **Mary was a woman who went on to have a normal marriage with Joseph, bearing other children who we see later as the brothers and sisters of Jesus**
- **And most importantly, we must see Mary as a woman in need of Jesus as her Savior, born as we all are under the curse of Adam's sin.**

The errors in Church history began with the thought that no "ordinary" woman could have born the Son of God... So they began to teach that she was more special than other women: Not that she was a humble virgin chosen by God for a special task, but that she was a special woman who was able to carry out that task.

They began to argue that Mary remained a virgin for her entire life and later taught that she could now be prayed to in heaven, asking her to appeal for special help from her Son.

In 1854 the Roman Catholic Church declared that her birth was also the result of a miraculous conception so she did not bear the curse of Adam's sin and had in fact lived a sinless life. And finally, in 1950 this erroneous trail has the Roman Catholic Church declaring that Mary did not face death, but ascended to heaven where she must be approached for special access to her Son Jesus.

When we focus on what the Bible actually teaches us about Mary we see our first important lesson about those valleys and why the errors about Mary must be corrected:

- Mary asked the Angel to explain what was going to happen and then she said, “behold the handmaiden of the Lord”
- When she responded to Elizabeth with her magnificent, she praised God as her Savior!

Mary knew her humble estate and she knew that she was a sinner and yet she offered herself as the handmaiden of the Lord.

- Through this simple faith and obedience God was able to use her to change the world!

-Oh, but we say, that was Mary... -- And look at the task God had chosen her for!

- How can this apply to me?

Well it does, and understanding how it does, helps us to answer the probing question that many ask when they consider the state of the church today...

- What can we do to overcome the massive problems we see in the Church or the world today??
- We don't see any human way to accomplish what God says will be done.

-- God has promised to fill the world with the Kingdom of His Son!

-- Mary was told that while still a virgin she would bear a son!

Now we need to honestly ask ourselves from today's perspective, which is the tougher to believe?

- It is easier to make Mary a special case and to see this as something already done in history.
- BUT when we consider what God calls on us to do today, we have all sorts of reasons and excuses for why it will not work.

We are much more likely to respond as Zacharias did, asking God just how He thinks that is going to get it done!

- Now please note that this did NOT stop God from doing what He said He would do, it just meant that poor Zacharias got to play the more embarrassing role in the Christmas story.

When we hear the various commissioning Scriptures that we use at the end of our divine worship service; when we sing one of God's Psalms as well as Simeon's prayer, we must learn to do so with the same attitude and response of Mary... Behold the handmaiden of the Lord.

So from a human perspective, what did this handmaiden have to do?

- She bore a son which is natural for women to do!
- She accepted even the humble circumstances of the birth, something many in the world today also face.
- She had to raise Jesus in a faithful covenant home...

Did she have to teach Him how to be God? Not hardly!

Did she have to teach Him how to eat, to walk, to talk and to play?

- As the Mother of God, yes she did, just like any faithful parents here today are called to do!

As the Mother of Jesus did she teach Him the Scriptures and take Him to the Temple at the appointed times.

- Yes she did, just as faithful parents are called on to do today.

So if we really care about the health of the Church and the world, we must be busy obeying the simple things that God has instructed us to do in raising faithful covenant children. You see, Mary did not have to have some miraculous or special birth to prepare her to be the God-bearer...

- **She needed faithful parents and grandparents who taught her to be obedient and humble in her faith!**
- **AND who taught her how to be a good mother!**

In all of this, she knew in the same way that all of us do that she was a sinner... But she believed that God was her Savior: A Savior Who fills in the valleys of sin: She was ready to be the handmaiden of the Lord, ready to bear the Son of God.

- **So there is no place in the Christian walk for feelings of inadequacy, or inferiority & certainly not depression.**

Not that all of these things and many other valleys in our lives are not real, but we must see them all for what they really are... SIN! Yes, basically they are the sin of unbelief and often the solution can be summed up in two words: STOP IT!

God loves and desires to use the humble, the rejected, the downtrodden for His work...

- **He is in the business of filling in valleys and all we have to do is make ourselves available as Mary did!**

AND IF you think I am being a little tough during this Christmas season, now I have to break the news to you that the valley part is the easy part.

What does God mean when He had the prophet also declare that the mountains would be brought low?

Here we are dealing with what C.S. Lewis called the greatest sin: Pride! Now we turn to the sins of Cain, and King Saul. The sins of Judas and King Herod. They were all those who wanted to serve God on their own terms...

- **Or more accurately wanted God to serve them on their terms!**

Yes, we often want to wallow in those sins in the valleys, refusing to confess and turn from them... BUT it is so much tougher to deal with the need for confession from the mountaintop of pride.

First and foremost as Lewis and others have rightly pointed out, we often don't even see the problem:

Lewis writes: "There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty of themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who is not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."

- **Mary is a shining example of one who avoided this sin of pride, which struck Zacharias deaf for months.**

She is an especially important example for our young people today who are encouraged by the world and the flesh to cherish what Jerry Bridges calls the pride of an independent spirit, in his book on Respectable Sins. Jerry says, "This spirit expresses itself primarily in two areas: a resistance to authority, especially spiritual authority, and an unteachable attitude..."

When we are young, we tend to think we know everything. Or, as one friend expressed it, "They don't know how much they don't know!"

- **Just as many today do not want to think of Mary as a sinner in need of a Savior, as she did...**
- **So many might recoil at the suggestion that she might have succumbed to pride in her life.**

The Scriptures show us again that she is human just like us:

- She is the worried mother asking Jesus what He was thinking when He stayed behind at the Temple.**
- She is the proud mother ready to put her son's work out front whether He thinks the time is right or not at the wedding of Cana.**
- She joins with her other children in thinking Jesus has gone mad during His ministry and attempts to bring Him home to sort things out, and perhaps to make Him more respectable.**

Just as Mary was ready and willing to present herself as the handmaiden of the Lord, so she worked through these lapses of parental pride...

- **We know this because we see her as the faithful mother and servant of Jesus at the end of His earthly ministry.**

What we see clearly in Mary's life is what she declares to Elizabeth under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts."

- **In other words as the Prophet declared, God has made those proud mountains low and filled in the valley's of despair!**

As Mary goes on to say, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly."

We know much more about Mary than we do the Wise men or Simeon, but I trust over these few weeks the examples of their lives will encourage us in our Christian walk for 2017!

- **We must see in these Saints the faithful obedience that God calls all of us to walk in.**

We must begin with the right attitude which we see in Mary:

An example the Apostle Paul tells us should come from Jesus Himself when he commands us to: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

- **This right attitude must then lead to faithful actions:**

- Mary presents herself as the handmaiden of the Lord**
- Simeon takes the baby in his arms.**
- The wise men follow the star**

And we see in the lives of these Saints that all of their faithful actions were based on a proper understand of God's will...

- Mary knew that she needed a Savior**
- Simeon knew that the Kingdom of Jesus will fill the whole earth!**
- The Wise men knew the King had been born**

Each of us must have such living faith grounded in God's Word:

- **We must know Jesus as our Savior.**
- **We must know Jesus as the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.**
- **AND we must believe that Jesus is going to fill the earth with His Kingdom and that He continues to carry out His plan today with the Saints in His Church...**

And yes, that would be all of us!

But we do not undertake these great tasks in our own strength, any more than Mary could have born the Son of God without the Spirit.

As the Prophet Isaiah properly points out in another famous passage just after our text; it is the Lord's work!

Isaiah 40: "28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, Jehovah, The Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength.

30 Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, 31 But those who wait on Jehovah Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint."

- **So let us greet each other and fellowship over our meal today with a hearty Merry Christmas and speak of a Happy New Year of serving in the Kingdom of Jesus!**

Communion Meditation: Luke 1:52, 53

"He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty"