

“Flat”
Isaiah 40:1-11
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
2nd Sunday of Advent - Peace
December 10th, 2023

I was born in Vancouver, and lived in the Lower Mainland for the first 27 years of my life, so when we moved to Ontario, there were a lot of things I missed about BC. I missed my family, of course. I missed the rain. I missed White Spot hamburgers, and Canucks games that started at 7 pm instead of 10 pm, and cheap and delicious sushi. And I missed the mountains. When you live here, you take it for granted how beautiful mountains are – you see them all the time, so you get used to having them in the background, and you don’t really appreciate them, but when you’re living in Ontario and then you come back to BC and you step off the plane and these snow-capped peaks are towering all around you, it’s breathtaking. There’s a reason people come and visit Vancouver from all around the world and call this one of the most beautiful cities in the world, because mountains are beautiful.

So today’s reading from the book of Isaiah might strike you as a little strange. The prophet speaks to God’s people, and promises that their world is about to be changed, completely and thoroughly transformed. A voice is shouting, ‘Clear the way through the wilderness for the Lord – make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! Fill in the valleys, level the mountains and the hills, straighten the curves and smooth out the rough places.’ Isaiah is describing a world where all those things we think of as beautiful, as desirable, as interesting and unique, they are all destroyed. The mountains and the hills are leveled, all those lofty peaks and high places are ground down to

nothing. All the valleys are filled in – all the little nooks and crannies in the landscape, the rolling rivers and glens, they are all bulldozed, so that what is left behind afterwards is complete uniformity, complete symmetry, a landscape that is perfectly flat – no features, no points of interest, just a perfectly straight highway running across a perfectly flat world, according to Isaiah, that's what the kingdom of heaven looks like, that's what peace looks like - flat.

When Johanna and I first moved to Ontario, we drove across Canada, and people warned us that the stretch from Winnipeg to Thunder Bay was uneventful – it was completely flat, and completely boring, kilometre after kilometre, mile after mile, of rocks and trees and trees and rocks, a highway that wasn't meant to be enjoyed so much as endured. Nobody looks at the highway from Winnipeg to Thunder Bay and thinks, yeah, this is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. The last thing we would want to do is take the mountains of Vancouver and flatten them down so they look like southern Manitoba. Joni Mitchell once sang that we pave paradise and put up a parking lot, and she meant that as a bad thing, but according to Isaiah, the parking lot IS paradise, the parking lot IS what the kingdom of heaven looks like, the parking lot IS what peace looks like.

So what is Isaiah talking about? Well, to understand that, we need to know who Isaiah is talking to. At this moment in their history, everything is horribly, horribly wrong for God's people. They are in exile, far away from their homeland, enslaved by powerful enemies who are trying to erase them from history. They've been conquered and deported, and their conquerors are doing everything they can to make the people forget their homeland, forget their old way of life, forget the stories they used to tell about the God who saved them and blessed them and set them free. The people are abused, and no-one notices.

They are attacked, and no-one cares. They are ridiculed and tormented, and no one defends them. In the eyes of the world around them, God's people are invisible, they are so unimportant, so irrelevant, that they might as well just disappear. And to this downtrodden, heartbroken people, the word of the Lord comes through the prophet Isaiah, and God tells the people, you are not invisible, because I see you. You are not unimportant, because I love you. You are not irrelevant, because I have plans for you. And if this world makes you feel invisible, then I will transform this world.

If this world makes it easy for evil to flourish, if this world provides places for cruelty and selfishness and violence to hide and spread, then I will transform this world, I will break down every stronghold, every hiding place, so that there is nothing hidden, nothing secret, nothing invisible, so that everything will be brought to light. The thing about a world that is perfectly flat is that there is nowhere to hide, no mountains to hide behind, no valleys to sneak into, everything is revealed, everything is open, everything is visible – and that means that no one can ever be forgotten, no one can ever be lost, no one can ever be invisible. A World that is perfectly flat is a world where everyone is equal, no one is higher up, no one is left at the bottom. Everyone can see God and be seen by God on an equal footing.

A world that is perfectly flat is a world where there is nothing separating us from the love of God, because it's right there in front of us, it's impossible to miss. That's the world that Isaiah promises to the people of Israel, a world of peace, a world where God brings order and justice and equality to every broken part of this planet. The light of God is going to shine in the darkness, and nothing will be able to block out that light, not the highest mountain, not the deepest

valley, when the light of God shines, it will shine everywhere, it will shine on everyone.

And we still need that light to shine here in our world today. We used to think that the world was a pretty good place if you just didn't ask too many questions or look too closely, but over the past few years, it's been getting harder to ignore just how broken and fallen our world truly is. For so long, we thought that things would keep getting better, that scientific progress and democratic institutions would inevitably solve all our problems, and we refused to notice all the suffering that makes our way of life possible, all the places around this planet where war and injustice are allowed to continue, are accepted as inevitable. We pay attention when tragedy hits the front pages of our newspapers, but we don't notice all the tragedies happening all across our country to people our culture considers unimportant, all the missing and murdered indigenous women and youth who we don't consider important enough to search a landfill to find.

We glorify celebrities and politicians and billionaires as people who will save us, who will solve our problems and lead us into a better future, and we are all too willing to ignore and excuse their faults, the abuses and corruption that allowed them to achieve such levels of wealth and fame. The more we shine light on the world around us, the more cruelty and selfishness is revealed, and if we are being honest, we need to shine that light on ourselves, on the uneven, hidden places within ourselves, in our churches, our families, our hearts. We have all contributed to making this world the way it is, allowing it to exist as a world where some people are invisible, some people are lifted high and others are left on the bottom. We have all walked past people on the street as if we can see right through them. We have all decided to ignore stories of injustice and abuse

among the marginalized and outcast people in our nation and our world. When you really, honestly look at the world for what it is, it can start to seem like there is no other way it could ever be, that we cannot possibly ever repair all the brokenness of this world, that we cannot stand up against evil because we feel too weak, too vulnerable, we feel invisible.

And yet, in our sorrow, in our despair, the word of the Lord still comes to us. The promise that Isaiah brought to God's people so many years ago still comes to us today: this is not the way the world is meant to be, and this is not the way the world will always be. Our God hears the cries of the abused and the oppressed, and God will not let them down. God will not abandon them, will not let them stay invisible, even if that means tearing this world apart, right to the bottom, leveling the mountains and filling in the seas, our God will do whatever it takes so that the light of heaven can shine in every place of darkness, drive out every trace of evil, and in that light we will see peace, because in that light we will see God.

And the way that light comes to us, the way that light reaches us, is because God came here, into this world, to dwell with us. In Jesus Christ, in the child of Bethlehem, God came down to our level, flattened himself to fit inside this world with us. In Jesus Christ, God chose to see us for who we truly are and yet still love us, chose to walk with us and lead us and carry us close to his heart. In Jesus Christ, our God is working to fill this world with light, to transform this world into a place where no-one is invisible, where those on high are brought low and those at the bottom are lifted up. In Jesus Christ, our God is bringing us peace, because there can be no more war, no more abuse, no more cruelty and death in a world where the light of Christ shines in every heart. The promise we

have in Jesus Christ is that God's light is coming, peace is coming, and until that day comes, until God transforms this world and fills it with unstoppable light, until then we are called to be people of peace, people who will shine God's light through everything we say and do. We are called to see the people of this world through God's eyes, to lift up the brokenhearted and oppressed and let them know that they are not invisible, because God sees them, because Jesus Christ is coming to set them free. We are called to reflect the light of Christ that shines in us out into the world, so that through our words, through our actions, the world around us will get a little flatter, the light and love of Christ will be seen and experienced by more and more people, the boundaries that would try to block that light are torn down and destroyed, one by one by one.

We are called to set aside our fears and doubts and know that Jesus Christ shines in us, Jesus Christ speaks through us, Jesus Christ carries us close to his heart, and he will never let us out of his sight. So Shout it from the mountaintops, O Zion, herald of good tidings! Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, Lift it up, and do not fear.

Say to the cities of Judah, your God is coming. The Glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. God's Peace is coming. May it come first in our hearts, and through us, in the world around us, wherever we go. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.