

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever been in the situation where you had an opportunity to tell someone about our church, about the Bible or about Christianity... but then you kept quiet. Maybe you didn't know what to say? Or you were afraid to speak? If you have felt this way, you are not alone. Sometimes we keep quiet because we know the person we're talking to is aggressive and will get angry if we speak of our faith. Sometimes we keep quiet because we simply don't know where to begin, or how to explain. Sometimes we keep quiet because we're afraid we will be ridiculed as foolish, closed minded... or worse.

Christmas is fast approaching. And you're here, so you know what Christmas is really about. It's about God sending his Son in human flesh to take on an epic rescue operation for all mankind. In this season, we are preparing for Christ's coming... not just in Bethlehem, but his second coming as well. And today we're adding one more thought: might we also use this Advent season as time not just to prepare ourselves, but as a chance to prepare others?

We heard in the Gospel lesson how John the Baptist was God's chosen prophet to prepare people for the coming of Jesus. Who will be a modern day John the Baptist? Will you step up and help prepare someone for the coming of Jesus?

Today in our sermon text, we hear about what God himself said to the prophet Isaiah. God commands Isaiah... and us... "Cry out!" What did Isaiah answer when God gave such a command? The same thing we would answer: "What shall I cry?" Listen to God's answer – and receive new courage to proclaim the good news to all people.

I want to especially focus on the second half of the reading, but let's look briefly at the first part because it's a prophecy about John the Baptist:

Isaiah 40:1-11 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. A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. [This verse is quoted in Matthew 3:3 talking about John the Baptist.] Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

So a prophecy about the John who would prepare the way for Jesus by calling people to repentance and turning them to God for comfort and forgiveness.

But now listen to the second half of the reading, and consider it a command of God to you personally.

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

This text is God's command to his prophet... to his people... to us... to proclaim God's message. But like Isaiah, we ask, "What are we to cry?" What exactly does God want people to know? **"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.."** What does

God mean when he compares mankind with grass? In Palestine, in April and beginning of May there can be beautiful fields of grass and wild flowers. However, in May a hot, dry wind comes from the east. One day a field can be lush and beautiful, and the next day the strong, hot wind kills the grass and flowers. People are like grass. God wants all people to realize that their achievements are fleeting. Their morality is worthless. Their lives are short.

We human beings have this bad habit of thinking more of ourselves than we ought. Surely there have been some amazing achievements, especially in the last 100 years or so. But when we compare these discoveries and achievements to the almighty God, we come away both awed and humbled. How amazing when man makes huge skyscrapers and long bridges spanning several kilometers! But they are nothing compared to the beauty of a massive snow-capped mountain towering over the valley below. And we've all seen how fragile a skyscraper really is. How amazing when we think about the speed and intricacy of a computer! But it is nothing when compared to the speed, intelligence and complexity of the human brain created by God. How beautiful are the paintings artists can draw! But they are only making a two dimensional image of an actual object created by God. How amazing is modern medicine and man's knowledge of the inner workings of the human body! But this is nothing compared to the amazement we should feel when we consider the one who designed and created those amazing bodies. "All flesh is grass."

Humans also like to boast of the good they do. We tend to think much of our goodness and morality. Most people think of themselves as morally good. However, when compared with the holy God, suddenly our goodness looks very evil.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them." The strong, healthy grass and beautiful flowers dry up when God sends the hot wind. The Hebrew word for "wind" is also the word they use for "spirit". When God breathes his spirit (wind) of holiness over us, our wrong thoughts, words and actions are laid bare. Nothing is hidden from the sight of our holy God. He knows the sinful thoughts that creep into our minds. He knows our less than perfect service to him. He knows when we're not using our gifts and abilities to their full for God's glory. He knows our pride, our short temper, our impatience, our gossiping, our failure to love others. God knows that the goodness men are so proud of is nothing but arrogance and blindness to our true condition. "All flesh is grass." This is what God wants us to "cry out" to people.

In comparing us to grass, God also wants all people to understand that their lives on this earth are very short. Death is not something that most people think about very much. People spend the vast majority of their time under the assumption that their death is not immanent. We don't know how long we have on this earth. Car crashes. Heart attacks. Sudden diseases. Natural disasters.

Such events painfully remind us that human life is short and fragile. Like grass which is green and healthy one day and dried up and dead the next, so also are humans. God wants people to be aware of this fact. God wants us to proclaim this truth to others. Why? If a person does not face the reality of his own mortality, he has no reason to give a thought to the One who grants eternal life. If a person ignores death and chooses to give it no thought, he also will not give thought to the reason people die. The Bible tells us the reason for death: **"For the wages of sin is death.** (Romans 6:23). Death entered this world when Adam and Eve sinned against God. Death is God's punishment for failing to live in line with his holy will. Sin separates us from God.

While man, his achievements and his morality are short-lived and pass away, in stark contrast: **"The word of the Lord stands forever."** God's wants us to tell others of their sinful condition and the reason for death. But there is more! There is reason to shout God's word with joy to all the world. Has God forsaken us? Has God condemned us? Does God hate us? No!

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”

God originally wanted these words spoken to Israel. Because of their repeated sin and rebellion, God allowed the Babylonians to conquer Israel. The Babylonians carried away a sizable portion of the population into captivity. Was this the final word from God? Did God leave Israel? Would his anger ever be appeased? Isaiah announces to Israel. **“Here is your God!”** After many years, God returned the captives in Babylon to Israel. God had forgiven them and restored his people to the Promised Land.

God also promises us that he has not left us. Isn't this amazing? Despite our rebellion, despite our sin, despite our lack of holiness, God is with us and had not forsaken us. He keeps his promises. He has forgiven our sins. He loves us and protects us. God wants us to cry out **“Here is your God!”**

Isaiah describes God's coming among his people in these words: **See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him.**” When the Lord comes, he comes in power. His enemies are defeated. He comes with power and with authority. He is the triumphant king.

How did God triumph over our enemies? God launched a daring rescue operation to save us. He launched a rescue operation that has been unfolding throughout human history. It culminated when his Son took a beachhead on enemy soil, born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem. When Jesus began his public ministry, Satan tried to win the victory by tempting Jesus to sin after 40 days in the wilderness. But he lost that battle. Christ's victory was complete when he conquered Satan, sin and death through his death and resurrection. The ransom price for our release was paid in full. News of this victory takes place one soul at a time to this day. Will you be God's messenger of Christ's victory?

Isaiah goes on: **See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.** Isaiah continues to use imagery from war. There is a saying, “To the victor goes the spoils.” God is the victor over all our spiritual enemies. When he comes to us, he doesn't come empty handed. He comes bearing rich gifts. Someone once said that the best way to come to a birthday party is with your arms so full that you have to knock on the door by kicking it with your foot. This is the picture of God coming to his people. His arms are full of gifts for his people. What does he give us? Forgiveness of sins. he gives us a meaningful life. He promises his guidance. He gives us a clean conscience... and of course he gives us eternal life. What great rewards he gives us!

Then suddenly, Isaiah changes the image. No longer does he talk about a victorious king... but suddenly he speaks of God as a shepherd. **He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.** With this description, Isaiah conveys the gentle love and care God has for his people. Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd, (John 10:14-15): **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”**

Our Savior has proven beyond all doubt that he loves us and cares for us. A shepherd cares for his sheep. The sick and small ones he carries in his arms. He leads the sheep to clean water and thick green grass. He gives them peace by defending them from all enemies. This is what Jesus, our Good Shepherd, does for us. Don't you think others will want to know this good news?

“Cry out!” God commands. “What shall I cry?” we ask. “All people are like grass.” People's lives are short and will soon pass. People haven't lived up to God's holy requirements. “What shall I cry?” God is with us. He has not forsaken us. Our Savior comes with power and authority to save. He comes bearing rich gifts from his victory over Satan. He showers us with

those gifts for eternity. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He loves us and cares for our every need. He takes special care of the young and sick. He gently guides us to a place of rest.

People of God, "Cry out!" Romans 10:13-15 for, **"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"**

Please, prepare your friends, neighbors and relatives for Jesus coming. Share with them the good news of Jesus. Or invite them to church. Or bring them to a Bible class. Or tell them about our school. Do something to get them connected to Jesus, for only those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.