

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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

So we're already at the beginning of the second week of Advent, and if you are like me, you are looking around your living room thinking, okay, where am I going to put the tree this year? Maybe some of you've already put yours up, but either way, most of you will have to move at least one piece of furniture to get the tree to fit in what ever room you have chosen to put it in. I don't know about you guys, but I don't keep a big empty space all year around just in case I might want to put a Christmas tree in there some time. I mean, my house is too full of stuff and too full of people for that kind of thing.

It's funny how we arrange our furniture though. When you walk into somebody's living room you can kind of tell where the emphasis is by how they put their furniture together. Chairs and sofa facing each other. Intimate conversation is an important thing for those people. Now if you see the furniture all the way back up against all of the walls in the living room, I'm thinking this is a party person. They've got lots of room for lots of people to stand around and have conversation. And, unfortunately like other people's and my house all the seating facing the television. Yea, either a movie fan or a sports buff or a TV fanatic like me, lives in that house. But whatever the arrangement you have to move something to get the tree in. And I live in a very small two-bedroom apartment at the seminary. So finding a place for the tree is always a struggle. I have a little tiny four-foot artificial tree, because seminarians move a lot, so that's just easier for moving. I also have a little tiny black furry dog who will eat any small item that is left unattended in my apartment. Now his favorite things are socks and shoes. Mostly socks thank goodness, they're cheaper than shoes. But, he will also chew any unattended item including Christmas ornaments, Christmas trees, tinsel, whatever. So the tree's got to be up off the floor. So last year we put it on a little table and sat it in front of our living room window, and it looked really pretty. But I've since rearranged the living room, several times. I am one of those people that likes to rearrange the furniture a lot. I like to see if I can find just that perfect arrangement so that everyone can either see the TV or we can all talk, or there's a light right by my chair so that I can read. I haven't found that perfect arrangement for a tiny little living room in an apartment yet, but I am going to keep trying until I do. Of course by then, I will probably be graduating.

So this constant rearranging really drives my son up the wall. He comes home from school and he sees me rearranging things and he runs for his room. He's afraid I am going to ask him to help me, and the dogs get all wound up too, because they think "oh no, we're moving again, this time she might forget us." So any way, we may try to put the tree in the same place this year. It looks really neat by the window, you can see it from outside, and it saves me from having to decorate the window separately, which is always a good thing. But that's gonna mean that I am going to have to either move the TV or the chair or the bench or something.

In today's readings, we hear about things being rearranged in preparation for another big event. In Isaiah we hear; "Prepare the way of the Lord, every valley should be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low." Now granted, Isaiah is talking about a road, not a living room. But you have to admit it is easier to move a couch around than it is to chop down a mountain. And at the beginning of the reading, Isaiah says "Comfort, O comfort my people." He goes on to proclaim that redemption has been achieved for the people. That the time of exile is over and that the glory of the Lord will be revealed to them. And this is the purpose of smoothing out the road, so everyone can see the glory of the Lord, that all creation will see the Lord coming. This is great news. Then the reading goes on, the people are expected to act, to respond to this great news of redemption. This great and wonderful news must be shared. The people must proclaim, "Behold your God, he will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep." What a great message, it's well worth rearranging the landscape for that.

And Mark uses part of the same reading to proclaim the next great event. The scripture from Isaiah would probably have been familiar to the people either reading or hearing Mark's Gospel, and it is familiar to us; it is part of some of the songs that we sing. But we as readers of Mark's Gospel and hearers of it have more information than the characters in the story. We already know about the free gift of God's grace, so we're expecting to hear good news about Jesus as the Messiah. But what is the good news? Mark tells us that we are at the beginning of the good news. The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. When we read all of Mark's Gospel we learn the good news is that Jesus died so that humanity could turn and look at God, seeing God's love for us, instead of being turned in on ourselves and our sin. But, that's not the end of the good news. Jesus wants us to respond to that love shown on the cross and rearrange our lives, our thinking, and our actions. We are redeemed by God's free gift of grace and we are able to see God's love for us through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who John announces is coming, and just like in Isaiah, we are called to respond with action. Mark calls us to rearrange our lives in response to the grace and redemption we have received. Just as John wants the people of Jerusalem and Judea to rearrange their lives to make room for the one who is coming after him. John says, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water for repentance, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

We are the continuation of Mark's good news of this story and no matter where the Christmas tree ends up in our living rooms, the question is, are we ready? Can we rearrange our lives, our mental furniture if you will, to make God the center? Through the story of creation and God's love for us we see that we are held in the center of God's love. No matter how we have sinned and turned away from God, we are still welcome. With the coming of Jesus to us where we are, God comes to us again in love. But are our lives too full for Jesus to fit in? Can we make room in our busy lives, and more importantly, can we make him the center of our lives? Seeing everything else in our lives through his love will change how we will see, not only our selves, but how we see others as well. God has come down to us in Jesus so that we can open our hearts to others and share God's love in all that we do and say.

Amen.

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