

Isaiah 40:1-9 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the
LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
³A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the
way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.
⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill
be made low;
the uneven ground shall
become level,
and the rough places a plain.
⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be
revealed,
and all people shall see it
together,
for the mouth of the LORD
has spoken."

⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I
cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the
flower of the field.
⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD
blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will
stand forever.
⁹Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good
tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good
tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

Mark 1:1-13 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"
⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of
repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean
countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were
baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was
clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate
locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy
Spirit."

The birth of Jesus - the arrival of a gift promised long before.

I hated diagramming sentences. Do students even still do that? I can remember the endlessly twisted vines of nouns and verbs, clauses and sub-clauses. Ughh. . . . But I wish I had paid more attention to it. Grammar matters. Vocabulary and grammar are the basic tools of communication. Grammar is how we say exactly what we mean.

Take verb tenses for example. Variously, Paul writes that we “have been saved” (Eph. 2:8), “we are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18), and “we shall be saved” (Rom.

5:9). So which is it? Is Paul just being sloppy with his grammar or even his thinking?

Israel and Rome

With the help of Herod the Great, Rome had secured its control of Palestine about 30 years before Jesus birth. Though Herod was allowed to sit on a puppet throne, Rome wielded its power through governors and procurators such as Pontius Pilate. In Jesus’ day, Rome controlled a vast empire spanning the Mediterranean and reaching up into Britain.

Rome wanted two things from its governors. They had to keep the peace and collect the taxes. There was constant strife between the Jews of Palestine and their Roman lords. Rome wasn’t troubled by the Jews’ peculiar belief in one God (who had chosen the Jews, no less!). Instead, Rome was constantly confronted by Jewish efforts to throw off Roman rule and establish God’s kingdom on earth. Indeed, Galilee was a hotbed of this revolutionary activity. In about 4BC, Judas ben Hezekiah led a Jewish revolt which the Romans ended by crucifying thousands of Jews! In 6AD, Judas the Galilean gathered some followers, declared himself the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and sought, through force, to overthrow Roman rule. Of course, it was a doomed-from-the-start effort, and Judas ended up dead at the hands of the Roman executioners just like every other would-be Messiah – and there were more than a few! The Roman governors were heavy-handed in their rule of Palestine and often provoked incidents with their ignorant and greedy actions. For example, early in his procuratorship, Pontius Pilate used money from the Jewish Temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then had to crush the resistance to his theft from the Jewish treasury!

Few would so bold as to refer to Paul as “sloppy” about anything. He was an intellectual powerhouse and his writings collected for us in the New Testament are God-breathed Scripture. He meant exactly what he said. So, as faithful readers of God’s Word we pay attention to the grammar, including the verb tenses. Every bit of it matters very much.

A moment of past, present, and future

The Old Testament prophets spoke a word of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. The Christian proclamation is that this Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God’s profound and humbling incarnation. It is as if they were saying “God will act!” – the future tense. The arrival of God’s Messiah *will* change the world.

This week is focused on the present tense. The bursting upon the scene of a man named John, who preached a message of preparation and repentance and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, a cleansing of their sins.

John is the prophet who announces that the Day of the Lord is fast upon God’s people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet, Isaiah, had cried out: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the

Lord, make his paths straight.’ ” And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John’s words drifted. The accompanying textboxes may help you see the danger that, at best, lay just beneath the surface. Too often, it came bursting forth spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount.

But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness, proclaiming the stirring words of Isaiah. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah, longing for God to God’s big thing.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who will reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

In essence, John was saying wake up, dress in your best clothes, the big day has come.

But John’s message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, “the evidence of the presence of the future.” Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God’s wondrous future comes rushing to meet the present day.

Preparation

In God’s kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God’s kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God’s kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God’s kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God’s kingdom is not just a promised future but also a present reality.

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the anointed of God. John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God’s light, to do all we can to build a world in which God’s will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. But in seeking after this divine marriage, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our “comforter” and “advocate” (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of comfort and peace and joy. May we see the reality of God’s kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children’s faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, h, and in all the goodness of this life.

A gallery of Jewish revolutionaries: a century of violence

The violence in Israel grew in the years after Jesus' crucifixion, culminating in two massive revolts. The following should give you a sense of the times.

In 40AD, Roman emperor Caligula, incensed by an anti-Roman incident at Jamnia, tried to insist on a huge statue of himself being placed in the Temple in Jerusalem in deliberate contravention of Jewish law and scruple. Only his early death forestalled the blasphemous act and its horrendous possible consequences.

Tholomaeus, a "brigand chief," was executed by Cuspius Fadus in the mid-40s, during the course of a large operation against brigandage in general. Around the same time a leader named Theudas, claiming to be a prophet, led a movement which aroused enough popular support to gain mention in Acts as well as Josephus. It too was put down by the Romans, and Theudas himself was executed.

We then hear of the two sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob and Simon, being crucified under the governor Tiberius Alexander (46-48AD), and of subsequent revolts under his successor Cumanus (48-52), including a riot at Passover in which perhaps 20,000 Jews were killed. Cumanus overreacted to a subsequent incident, whose complexity nicely illustrates the problems of the time. Some Galileans were murdered on their way through Samaria to Jerusalem for a festival. The Jews took violent revenge on Samaria. Cumanus responded with even more violence, out of all proportion to the original incidents. The Jews then successfully accused Cumanus before Claudius the emperor of having favored the Samaritans. The ringleaders of the Jewish fighters, Eleazar ben Deinaeus and Alexander, were finally captured by Cumanus' successor Felix (52-60), who proceeded, as Fadus had done in 44-46, to purge the country of *lestai* (rebels), crucifying a considerable number.

There was plenty more, but this brief list gives you a sense of the strife that plagued first-century Judea. In the late 60's, things came to a full head. A large-scale Jewish revolt was decisively crushed by the Roman legions, under the leadership of Vespasian and his son, Titus. The temple was destroyed, as Jesus warned it would be unless the Jews gave up the sword. Vespasian carried the temple loot to Rome. Later, Rome built a large arch to commemorate this victory and you see this arch today, with a relief of a menorah, if you visit the Roman Forum. Finally, in 135AD, Rome ended the strife for all time. The Romans smashed a revolt led by Simon-bar-Kochba (son of the star) and displaced the Jews from all Judea.

This material on Jewish revolutions was taken and adapted from the study guide to a series by N.T. Wright, *Jesus: The New Way*. The guide was prepared by Denise George and is copyrighted by the Christian History Institute.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *The gospel of Luke*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

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Scott's Sunday Class

This week: Our Christmas Potluck

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

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