



# Messengers of Hope

December 7 • 2008

## Focus Scripture

**Isaiah 40:1–11**

Additional Scriptures

Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Peter 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

God our Shepherd,  
your steadfast  
love sustains and  
restores us. Open  
our hearts to trust  
your presence to  
guide us into the  
place of promise.  
Grant that we, who  
have heard your  
words of hope, may  
be messengers of  
hope to others.  
Amen.

**W**hen God’s people are in distress, messengers of hope come to remind of God’s steadfast love. Isaiah speaks a message of comfort to God’s people in exile: God will bring them back to the land of promise. The other scripture passages remind us of the good news of God’s faithfulness. We, too, are called to be messengers of hope.

## Focus Scripture: Isaiah 40:1–11

The book of Isaiah contains at least three sections, each speaking in and out of a particular era in Israel’s history. The first 39 chapters, dating from the 8th century BCE, are a series of warnings of coming disaster for the people of Judah. Chapter 40 begins the section of God’s word to the Judahites after their kingdom fell in 586 BCE. At that time many people were carried into exile in Babylon, perhaps even the prophet who delivers this message.

After years in Babylon, many Hebrew exiles had built homes and established comfortable lives there. But empires rise and fall, and Cyrus of Persia came to threaten Babylon. Cyrus was thought to be more tolerant of the Hebrew exiles. There was hope for a new beginning. In **Isaiah 40:1–11**, the prophet speaks to persuade the exiles to go back to Jerusalem. Cyrus will be God’s instrument in fostering their return. Indeed, Cyrus eventually did provide for rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple.

In this passage, God sits in the midst of the divine council and speaks a message of comfort to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem. Their suffering is coming to an end; they have paid double the penalty for their sins – their defiant acts against God’s ways. The exiles hope there will be a way for them to return to the land of promise. The prophet calls on the leaders of the people to prepare this “way of the Lord,” to make possible the return of God’s people.

God is creating a new geography, raising valleys and lowering mountains, smoothing the path that leads the exiles back to Jerusalem – back to the heart and centre of their religion. God’s people can confidently proclaim that God is faithful. Even though humankind is transitory, like grass in a field, God endures. The word of God stands forever.

Verses 9–11 answer last week’s question: Where is God? God is here, Isaiah reminds the people. God the shepherd is coming with strength and with tenderness. God’s glory will once more be seen among the people. And, after this time of exile, God’s glory and presence will not be revealed to only Israel and Judah. “All people shall see it together” (verse 5).

The psalmist echoes Isaiah’s proclamation that God’s salvation is near at hand. **Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13** recalls that God has acted in the past to forgive and restore. And God’s “glory” – the light of God’s presence – will be seen again. The marks of God’s salvation are steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace; these define the path for those living into God’s reign.

In **2 Peter 3:8–15a**, Peter writes to counter the claims of those who say that the present age will continue forever. Peter calls readers to prepare immediately for life in God’s reign by repenting and leading lives of holiness and godliness.

**Mark 1:1–8** begins the story of Jesus by introducing John the Baptizer. Like Isaiah’s “voice crying in the wilderness,” John is a messenger preparing the way for God’s coming. And, as in the other readings, the desired response of those who hear the message is repentance – turning from disobedience and turning toward God’s way.

• • • • •

When we are despairing, when we feel far from our true centre, we need the message of hope contained in today’s readings. God is faithful. God will restore and guide. Isaiah, Cyrus, and John all were God’s messengers of this hopeful word. When have you encountered such messengers of hope? What message about God’s love and care do you want to tell others?

If you have Internet access,  
visit [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com)  
to access *Spirit Sightings*  
for connections between  
current events and the  
focus passage.

