

## Sermon 12/6/2020

### Isaiah 40:3-11

#### Pastor Dan Hollis

Think of the most important graduation you ever had. Whether it was high school or college, middle school or driving school, med school, law school, vocational training, boot camp, Confirmation, citizenship... remember the feeling of accomplishment. More than that, remember what it meant for you! What a journey you had completed. Life-changing. The person you were then and the person you were now... something was different. You climbed the mountain, you cleared the obstacles, you lifted the weight... and there it was, the promised land, laid out before you.

Only, that's not the end of the story, is it? Was it?

Anyone who's graduated college knows that as *much* of an uphill battle it might have been to get *through* it at times—the papers, the late nights, the *tuition*—and the victory it truly *was* to stand there with your diploma and toss your cap into the air... that great accomplishment is now the beginning of the next. Because *then* you have to get a job. Start your career. Wrestle with resumes and interviews and internships and experience—or lack thereof. And that's just in the hopes that you might get *health* insurance, not to *mention* paying off your student loans. There's still a long road to career *fulfillment*, isn't there? When you *can* finally look back and say... "I've made it." Which is the thought we all *had* when we *graduated* something, isn't it?

You graduate driving school... you've still got to deal with traffic, *and* your parallel parking skills could really use some work. You graduate Confirmation Class, and you've still got a whole lifetime of experiences and faith formation ahead of you to become the Christian you'll be. You graduate boot camp, you've still got to fight the war.

It's this tension of the completed and the yet-to-complete that is at the heart of the Christian story, and it's a theme that appears again and again throughout the Bible.

In the beginning, God *created* heaven and earth and saw that it was *good*... but the descendants of Adam and Eve still had to tend creation and help it to grow. And how many times did God have to go in and *fix* things that were already supposed to be perfect?

Two thousand years ago, Christ came to reconcile God and humanity, to bring us closer together, and to herald the beginning of a holy era of peace and perfection... and yet for two thousand years we have clearly seen that though Christ has come and changed *everything*... there *must* be still more to come. There *has* to be.

The context for our Scripture reading today is that it's a message for the people of Israel, hundreds of years *before* the birth of Christ, who were living in another one of these moments of tension between the "already" and the "not yet."

The first thirty-nine chapters of the book of Isaiah were written *before* God allowed the Empire of Babylon to run roughshod over the land of Israel, and start the Babylonian Exile, which saw the Israelites forced to live as refugees, ejected from their homeland, adrift without culture, temple, or foundation for *generations*. Isaiah 40, however, picks up *after* the exile has *ended*. Babylon is no more, and the people of God have returned home.

Victory! Relief! What has been dreamed of for so long has finally come to pass. The people of God are home again, and God's favor has returned.

It would be easy to treat this as a graduation. The long dark night of the soul has passed, and the Promised Land has come. And yet... not *only* has the trauma of the exile not faded from memory, but the home they returned to is not the paradise they sought. There is still work to do.

The decades of war, from the Babylonians and the Persians, and generations of foreign occupation, meant the people of Israel had little that was familiar to return to. Even their most holy temple, the home of their God, the center and lynchpin of their worship, had been destroyed. If anyone was even still alive who could *remember* seeing the temple, they would have been quite old, with memories faded by time and trauma.

Their deliverance had come, their long national nightmare was over, and the time for rejoicing was at hand... but even though their kingdom had come... it was also still *yet* to come. Like I said, they had work to do. And it would take one brick at a time.

We hear it in the words of Isaiah 40, in a time when prophets should have been saying, "Truly our God has brought us victory, truly God's glory has been revealed, truly our faith has been rewarded..." instead, the prophet says:

"In the wilderness *prepare* the way of the LORD, *make* straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every 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.

*Then* the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people *shall* see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

All those things *had* happened to get them to where they were now—their time in the wilderness *had* ended, and the people *did* see the glory of the Lord revealed... but, all those things still had *yet* to happen.

Like a student with a fresh diploma in hand, their victory had come... and yet the road *to* victory still lay out ahead of them, full of twists and turns, obstacles and blind curves.

This tension between the “already” and the “not yet” is no less apparent in the Christian story, and—in part—the *Christmas* story.

For uncountable years, God’s people had been waiting for a savior to come, to institute a kingdom of God, an endless reign of peace where oppression and the kinds of violence seen at the hands of Babylon and the Roman Empire would be *ended* at the very hands of the Most High.

As Christians, we recognize this savior, this king, this Prince of Peace, as being born a baby in a stable to a woman named Mary. Everything before that first Christmas was a millennia-long Advent season, waiting for God to be born to us as a child who would grow up to save us all and herald what some call the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

And that’s exactly what happened. Christ came to live among us and established God’s kingdom, through his work, his teachings, and even his death and resurrection. The Kingdom of God has *already* started. We’re in it *now*.

...*But* in the words of theologian Geerhard Vos, “And yet, there is a ‘not yet.’”

I mean look around us. Does this world *look* like the Kingdom of Heaven? Is this world we live in something a “Prince of Peace” would have built?

Does that mean we *broke* God’s kingdom? Does that mean we actually *defeated* the Christ that was born on Christmas Day?

No. It means that we haven’t lived *into* it yet. Christ himself said that the Kingdom of God is here, but he also said that it was yet to come. It is “among you,” it has “come near,” it is “at hand,” and it “will be.”

Because of Christ’s actions and his teachings that each one of us carry and share with one another and live by, the Promised Land is *within* us, *and* among us. It’s already here, and has been for two thousand years... but it’s not yet complete, is it? As the Apostle Paul said, “when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”

Just as the Israelites at the end of the exile, who still had a temple to construct and a culture to build from the foundations of what had come before, we have among us the foundations of a Kingdom of God that has not yet come into completeness.

What it’ll look like when it’s complete? We have only the promises of God and teachings of Christ to serve as blueprints. What we can tell for sure is that while Christ is among us now and forever, Christ has not come in fullness... *yet*.

No diploma means your journey is over. No Christmas bonus means your financial struggles are at their end. An election doesn't mean that *everything* is perfect, an end to slavery doesn't mean that all racial tension has *vanished*, and a *wedding* doesn't mean that it's gonna be smooth sailing every day from now on.

A vaccine doesn't mean a pandemic is finally over... not *yet*.

The birth of Christ means that the glory of the Lord has *already* been revealed and that the Prince of Peace has come... but it was clear to Isaiah and it should be clear to us... the glory of the Lord is yet to come.

God is already here, but God has not yet come. We stand like the Israelites looking upon a foundation laid down by Godself, and just like the Israelites all those centuries ago... we have work to do.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every 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. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." Amen.