



Mail Early

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Isaiah 40:1-3

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

My father was a mail man. The Christmas season always meant a whole lot of extra work for him. I remember that he had to work six days every week in December. He even had to go to work on Sundays. Back in the 1950's and 1960's the post office would make first class deliveries on Sundays in December. During the rest of the year, he had to deliver the mail one time a day, but during December he had to make two deliveries every day - one in the morning hours and one in the late afternoon hours.

There was one simple reason why he had so much work to do during December. It didn't have anything to do with Internet shopping, because there was no Internet back then. It didn't have anything to do with mail-order catalog shopping, because there just weren't that many catalogs sent out. In fact, back then, almost everybody did his or her Christmas gift shopping in person in the downtown stores.

The one simple reason why there was so much work for the Post Office back then was Christmas cards. My mother used to send out at least one hundred Christmas cards every year. We'd get at least that many back. I don't think people send out as many Christmas cards as they used to, but the last statistic I read about it said that the Post Office expects about four billion Christmas cards will be mailed in the United States this season. Four billion! That's still a lot of mail.

Being the son of a mail man, I know the secret to getting your Christmas card greetings to your friends. You've got to "Mail Early!"

Do you mail early? My mother always did. My mother would be disappointed in me. I don't. I used to. Years ago I used to have a printed list for Christmas cards. I'd get busy in early December. I'd send out cards with personal notes to a whole bunch of people. My old friends who are spread all over this country would get those cards and notes by mid-December. They all would read the news of the McGlone clan.

But somehow over the years, I got later and later. My "Mail Early" upbringing got lost. My Christmas cards became "New Years notes." Every year my cards got sent out later and later. My printed list got sloppy. It got lost. Now, I send out very few cards. In fact, the only ones I send out are the ones Janet puts in front of my face and demands, "Do it NOW."

The trouble is, I'm just not prepared for mailing early any more.

How about you? Are you prepared to mail early?

That's what Isaiah is telling you to do in this morning's scripture. He's telling you to get prepared. But, he's not just talking about mailing early. He's telling you to prepare yourself for something much better than that! He's telling you to prepare, to make a straight pathway to your heart, to get yourself ready for your Savior.

Although he didn't know what it would be called, he's telling you to get ready for Christmas. Get ready for the birth of Jesus.

At my house I would normally be getting ready right now. I'd have the decorations ready to get out. The trees ready to put up. The lights ready to plug in. But not this year, not with the move to a new house. My decorations are still in storage. I can't even get to them. I look around at the disarray in which I'm living, and I know I'm not prepared for Christmas.

My mother would be surprised at me. My wife could be perturbed with me. Isaiah would be disappointed in me. I'm not prepared for Christmas.

How about you?

When you're getting things prepared - whether it's decorating your house or hanging lights on your shrubs, whether it's sending out your cards and presents to friends far and near or planning a spectacular party - what is the message you want to send out this Christmas season?

Have you prepared yourself for the birth of your Savior?

I know it's going to be difficult for some of you. Some of you are feeling overwhelmed right now -

- maybe it's because of an illness you've got,
- maybe it's because of a relationship that has been torn apart,
- maybe it's because of trouble at home or on the job,

- maybe it's because of sadness in your soul,
- maybe you've lost someone you love (and this will be the first Christmas without her or him by your side),
- maybe the holidays remind you of someone who died years ago (and it makes you sad),
- maybe you're living in a new place and you're just not comfortable there, not yet.

There can be so many reason why you're not prepared for Christmas, so many worries, so many sorrows, so much sadness - but no matter what the reason might be, you're still preparing a message to send out to the world!

What will that message be?

"Leave me alone."

"Don't bother me."

"I'm a grouch."

"I'm weary of it all."

"I'm stuck on yesterday's hurts."

"I'm still full of self pity."

"I'm afraid of tomorrow."

"I wish things were different."

You're going to send out a message this Christmas season. You just might not be aware of what kind of message you're already preparing to send out.

Why not make it something good this year?

What shiny garland of joy can you hang in your living room to brighten somebody else's dreary and depressing life? What jolly little elf can you send down your loved-one's chimney? What hopeful little message can you scrawl across the bottom of every Christmas card you mail out this year?

If you want to show your mother and Isaiah that you're really prepared for the birth of your savior, what can you do? Is it enough to say, "cheer up"? Should you write, "have hope"? Is a simple "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year" good enough?

Isaiah wrote, "Comfort, comfort, my people... speak tenderly to each other... prepare the highway for your Lord to come to you."

In all your Christmas preparations this year, get ready to send out - and get yourself ready to receive - some Good News even when the times are bad! As a child of God, you've always got some good news to share. Never for it!

You've got some Good News. It begins with mercy.

For someone in your condition, for someone who's sinned like you, for someone who's made all the same mistakes you have, for someone who's strayed off and gotten lost, like you - prepare yourself to tell and to hear the good news that our God is still a God who forgives sin.

There is forgiveness coming this Christmas, and that's just about the best Christmas gift you can get. God does not take pleasure in condemning you; He wants to have mercy on your soul.

You've got some Good News. It continues with God's promise to be with you - no matter what.

When you're in distress and feel like you're going to panic, when your world starts to fall apart, when you can't imagine any thing worse - God comes to you.

Isaiah wants you to remember what God has done in the past. When Moses and the children of Israel Egypt, God heard their cries of misery. When the Jews were exiled to Babylon, God heard their groaning.

When you're out there feeling all alone, when you think nobody cares, when you can't see any way out of your predicament; God will be there for you!

Are you afraid that's not true any more? Do you think you have strayed so far that God can't find you? Are you afraid that you've stayed away so long, that God has forgotten what you look like? Do you think your sins are so bad that God can't handle them?

Well, if you do - it's time to prepare your doubting heart to believe once again that God will be there for you. That's a promise!

You've got some Good News. God tells you to fill your heart with hope!

Maybe you're like a black sheep that has gone astray,

- maybe you've wandered off and can't find your way back,

- maybe you've forgotten who you are, or where you came from,

or who your God is.

Well, don't you want to hear and speak this good news?

God is coming like a good shepherd to take you back home.

Like a loving father, He welcomes His prodigal child back into the bosom of the family.

Like a loyal spouse, He cleans up your messes and laughs at your silly jokes.

Like an understanding friend, He's ready to forgive and forget so you can start over again.

Get yourself prepared for some Good News like that!

In this battered and brutal world, you sometimes lose hope that things will ever be better. You sometimes think your life will never turn out right. Well, get ready to turn that kind of thinking all up-side-down.

If you look for it, you'll find it. Hidden away at the back of your Christmas tree will be one special little present. When you unwrap that little box, you'll find a message inside. It will be God's special message just for you. It will read: "No matter what, have hope!"

I know what you want. You want to have hope in your heart that God is still on your side. You want to hope that there is nothing He can't handle. You want to know that He's holding your life, and your future, in His strong, sure hands.

Well, I'm here to tell you - and all the decorations you see around town, all that Christmas Carols you hear sung, and all the candles that twinkle through the night - they're all here to tell you - that you can live in hope. God will see you through your predicament.

After all, He sent His only son into this world - just for you. Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. When you carry Jesus in your heart, there is no problem which can't be faced and conquered.

This Christmas season, prepare to send out - and get ready to receive - some Good News: good news of mercy coming your way, good news of God's promise to be with you, and good news that hope is still alive.

That's the message on God's Christmas card. Have you bothered to read it lately?

An elderly couple was in a Hallmark Shop looking for a packet of Christmas Cards. The wife picked up a box and said, "O, I like this one, it's so pretty; but I don't care for the words inside the card." The husband replied, "If you like the picture, the rest doesn't matter. Nobody bothers to read the message any way."

Maybe that explains your problem. You want the trappings, the excitement, the glamour, the tinsel. You love to hear the music; you even hum along with the radio. You decorate your house. You hang the lights. You put up a tree. You set out a light-up Santa. You plan a party. You buy gifts. You send out cards.

You do all that, and you think you're prepared. But you haven't bothered to read God's Christmas message, and you haven't taken it to heart.

So, prepare yourself completely this year. God's Christmas message is always one of Good News. Through the birth of the baby Jesus, God is sending you good news - even if times are bad!