

## Prepare The Way God Has Come

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a (Series B. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent) Ps.85:1-2, 8-13

Mark 1:1-8

Prayer:

A little boy was waiting for his mother to come out of the grocery store. As he waited, he was approached by a man who asked, "Son, can you tell me where the Post Office is?" The little boy replied, "Sure! Just go straight down this street a *coupla* blocks and turn to your right."

The man thanked the boy kindly and said, "I'm the new pastor in town. I'd like you to come to church on Sunday. I'll show you how to get to Heaven." The little boy replied with a chuckle. "Really! come on bro.....you don't even know the way to the Post Office."

The Advent season brings a variety of symbols that aid us in prayerful reflections. The use of the Advent wreath begun in the time of Martin Luther and how it is used differs among the many traditions that employ it.

In many, there are at least four candles on a wreath of evergreen that is shaped in a perfect circle to symbolize the *eternity of God*. The lighting of the candles is to symbolize the coming of Christ.

During each Sunday of Advent, the candles represent the *four virtues Jesus brings us: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love*. The Christ candle, in the center of the wreath, is lighted on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day reminding Christians that Jesus is the light of the world.

Last week I chose *Hope* as a focus and this week, *Love*. Keeping alive Hope in and *Love* of Christ is a way to prepare ourselves and keep our own paths straight in these unsettled times. Things weren't so very different in John the Baptizer's times, except no one knew the story of Jesus as we do now.

Their lives were filled with wars, pandemic, racial hatred, poverty, and oppression and then here comes this rather wild-looking person direct from the desert telling them to straighten up and straighten out - the way of the Lord must be prepared!

Also, the Messiah's arrival really was imminent as Jesus was literally on his way to them. We've gotten a bit complacent, 2000+ years later. We conveniently forget the caution that the time of Christ's return *will come like a thief*.

Here, today, in our world filled with wars, disease, racial hatred, corruption, and oppression, etc., from the first chapter of the first Gospel ever written, John is still *the voice crying...in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4)*.

Are we listening and heeding or is it just that same old familiar refrain we hear on the way to Christmas? This is a time of beginning, a moment to *discover*. It is again, always, time for soul-searching and sincere repentance.

Preaching has become a detestable word these days. We no longer wish to be preached to, and we no longer wish for preachers to preach. The church is in trouble, largely because either the sermons are too long and drudgery, or too short and just plain boring.

Some of that criticism is rightly earned, I think. Some preachers of today tend to take the easy and speedy way to retirement, a comfortable parish, in a comfortable place.

Don't ruffle too many feathers, maintain the status quo, don't dare speak too specifically of sins or ills of society, be politically correct all the time and by all means don't do anything to upset the church council or *shadow council* and the synodical hierarchy.

Preachers have been slow to take up the itchy camel hair vestments of John the Baptist, not to mention his wilderness diet of grasshoppers and wild honey. We have failed to be prophetic preachers, to speak the Word of God at the risk of offending, or making people unhappy or uncomfortable, of calling them out of their comfort zones into the wilderness.

Then again, how many Christian congregations put up with a pastor who calls even the most religious to repentance, a preacher who has enough courage and conviction to rebuke people for wrong doing, calls sin what it is. Very, very few do so.

*God sends preachers.* That's His mode of operation. *He sends prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastor-teachers to proclaim the Word,* to bind up the saints through the work of Ministry, to build up the Church with the Word so that she grows into full maturity in Christ Jesus and is not blown around by every tantalizing teaching that whispers sweet nothings into her ears. God sent the prophet Isaiah. He sent John the Baptist.

*And when God's preachers submit to preach God's Word in it's totality, it is the mouth of the Lord that has spoken.* That's the Word that the prophet Isaiah is sticking into our ears this very morning. *The mouth of the Lord that has spoken.* And wherever Lord speaks, there is life and salvation.

*Comfort and conviction.* We have it in the text from Isaiah this morning. From the Lord's mouth comes a comforting Word. "*Comfort, comfort my people,*" says your God. "Speak tenderly, lovingly, speak to the heart of my bride, and preach kind words to her. Comfort her, but don't make her comfortable.

Tell her that she is forgiven." God sends his preachers to preach a comforting Word. He wants to woo His bride to Him with tender words. Her time of hard service has come to an end. Her exile is nearly over.

Her sin has been paid for. Christ paid the punishments of our sin under Law. The Church has received from the Lord's hand double for all our sins. Not just enough, but double forgiveness.

That's how it is with the Gospel - more forgiveness than we have sin to forgive. Imagine that. There is no sin so great that Jesus didn't atone for it on the cross. No life so wretched that God could not redeem it. There is more than enough forgiveness in Jesus to cover them. More than enough forgiveness to comfort others. Comfort, comfort my people, God says to his preachers. Bring them comfort.

Tell them, "Your time of hard service is ended. Your sins are forgiven." How can it be? How can we be certain? Because *"The mouth of the Lord has spoken."* "In the wilderness the voice calls people to prepare. "Prepare the way for the Lord." Every low place will be raised up. Every high place will be laid low. Everyone must become completely other than they are.

Metaphorically speaking the *proud* and *high* and *mighty*, will be brought down. If we are made a mountain of self-righteousness out of your good works and commandment-keeping, the Law will come and push everything over like ten bulldozers. The Lord will push down anything that stands between us and our salvation.

The voice calls everyone without exception to have a change of heart: the religious and the unreligious, the Pharisee and the publican, the good and the bad, the moral and the immoral, those who have already repented and those who think they have need for repentance. God's grace is sufficient for All.

The voice says, *"Cry out."* "All people are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field." We are mortal. We die. "From dust you were taken, to dust you will return. Our works and accomplishments are like the flowers of the field. A momentary splash of beauty and color, and then they are gone.

So, it is with everything that glorifies humankind. "Here today, gone tomorrow." The great civilizations of *Egypt, Medo-Persia, Babylon, Greece, Rome* - all are faded and gone.

Their dusty remnants and ruins are left for archaeologists to study and tourists to pose in front of. The great kings have come and gone, and their kingdoms have come and gone with them.

I would like to ask this question! *"What do we have to offer to God, if he comes out of His hiding?"* Please tell me, *"what do you and I have to offer to God, if God comes out of His hiding?"*

A bouquet of flowers!! ....or chunk of our savings?.... Visit a nursing home, the oncology ward, a veteran hospital, the cemetery. If that doesn't suit your style just take a look in the bathroom mirror and listen to that inner voice saying. "*The grass withers, the flower fades.*"

There is nothing in us that will last - not our good looks, not our strength, not our intelligence, not our achievements. There is nothing in us that we can count on. Only the Word of our God that will stand forever and it is upon His Word, and not what we do, that our eternal life *rests*. Only the Word is sure. *The mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

The Good News is always louder than the Law. The good news is that "*God is here.*" Here in our hearing His Word of grace. Here in the water of Baptism. Here in the Word of Absolution. God is here in the Eucharist.

He is here, clothed in humanity. He is here to prepare us for the Day of his coming. This is the good news which the Church is called upon to shout to the nations of the earth.

Shout it to the villages, towns, and cities. Shout it to every nation. "*Here is your God.*" He is the Baby of Bethlehem, the Man of Calvary, the crucified, risen, and King of kings. In humility and openness of hearts we receive this marvelous Good News.

Christmas reaffirms the mystery of human community. Christmas tells us that God loves us so much He has stooped low to make Himself present in all of Human life. He is waiting there to be discovered. This is what *Advent season* is all about to discover the true meaning of the coming of Christ. God is waiting to be discovered.

But until we have discovered Him in *a spouse*, in *a child*, in *a parent*, in *a friend*, in *a stranger*, in *an enemy*, we have not really discovered His Presence in the world. Christmas is not a promise of either to buy and sell or continuous great entertainment; Christmas is an invitation to *discovery*. To discover the person of Jesus Christ as our Lord and personal Saviour.

Christmas will lack its full meaning if we do not prepare our own hearts a way for the Lord. It is in our hearts that we need to make a straight highway for God. It is the valleys of sin in our own hearts that are to be filled with God's mercy and healing, and the mountains and hills of pride in our own hearts that are to become low.

For those who love and trust Jesus Christ, there is nothing to fear of his coming. His coming means salvation and life to those who believe in him. You are the people of His pasture, the sheep of His hand.

Repentance is a beginning that is blessed by God, a beginning that we need to make each day, one day at a time.

- As we turn to face the Son of God, our lives are warmed,
- his light shines on our path, we find our paths are made straight,
- the valleys in our way are raised up,
- the mountains and hills made low, the rough places are leveled and made plain.

For our God walks with us. He will carry us in those arms once extended for us on the cross. He will gently guide us, through life and death to the resurrection to eternal life. Faith is to ... Trust that He will do this. We have His Word.

***Therefore ... .... Comfort, comfort my people, Speak tenderly to Jerusalem  
and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed,  
her sin has been paid for. AMEN.***

December 10, 2023