

“How God Prepares”

Mark 1: 1-8, Isaiah 40:1-11

Rev. Jennifer Dunfee

December 6, 2020

You can understand why this is such a compelling message for the people. A people who have struggled to hold their faith in an unprecedented season. A people who have seen internal community struggles mount as external struggles and pressures increase. A people whose faith is challenged by the forces of the secular culture around them, and they watch more and more of their numbers abandoning the traditions and worship practices of their parents. A people who long for a remembered, better time. You can see it then, Isaiah speaking these words to the weary people of Israel, in exile in Babylon, who are setting the bar low for anything getting better anytime soon: “Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God” what hope they brought, what possibility, what promise. That wildernesses don’t last forever. And God is always on the way. All people *all people*, will see the glory of the Lord revealed. That the might of God looks like this: a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering a lamb in his arms, right here and leading, gently, the mother sheep. Comfort is that mix of glory and might, gentleness and nurture.

You can understand why this other is such a compelling message for the people. For a people who live under the tension of oppression and know how quickly it can flare up in their direction. For a people where a very few at the very top had nearly everything and the vast majority struggled for what they needed each day. A people whose worship practices made them different and the complexity of staying faithful increased all the time. A people who long for a remembered, better time. You can see it, then, John drawing the people from the countryside and city into the wilderness, offering with the water a forgiveness after repentance, a possibility of renewal, of a straighter path to God, a hope that if John speaks words of God to them from the wilderness, maybe God has been with them all along in the places that feel like wilderness, and a promise of one who is to come in power, with a baptism that is not limited to the cleansing waters of forgiveness but that will become the Holy Spirit.

You can understand why this and this other are such compelling messages for the people, then the people, and *the people*. These Advent scriptures point to the simple promise that things will not always be this way, and to a people who have had a really hard year. I think in all of my sermons I have listed that out, but let’s just say we all know, and in addition to what we have all experienced some of you have had an even harder year. All of us might have different things, times, places that come to mind when we hear the phrase, long for a remembered, better time, but we do have one particular longing in common and that is to be in here together. Things will not always be this way, but the waiting is still long and hard.

So this Advent, we can hear the promises that point to something good that is on the way, the glory of the Lord revealed, the one who comes in power and Spirit, with renewed urgency. Yes, these are the words that we need to hear, that would draw us out to the wilderness to hear more and draw us into the waters of repentance that promise forgiveness. Like the way we rise

to the occasion of a tough but excellent teacher, the kind that can see in you more than you see in yourself, the people, compelled by this message, understood that to get to the promise, there were things they needed to do, changes they needed to make, a refocusing, a making room. A leveling of the high and low, a smoothing of the rough, a filling in of the holes, a straightening of the crooked. It is action of repentance born of hope that looks backward – the people of Israel who received a message in their wilderness – in order to look forward – the people of Judea receiving a message in their wilderness of the hope that is to come. It is why Joanna Adams describes it like this: “To repent is to turn and look in the direction from which salvation comes and to do the work necessary to receive it when it comes.” (Christian Century article, *Change Agent* 11.28.06) And why the preacher Frederick Buechner says, “True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying “I’m sorry” and more time looking into the future and saying, “Wow.” <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/4/6/repentance> Do the necessary work, but do it not stopped, stuck and staring at all that is not going right right now, but already moving through the direction your salvation comes, already forming the wow on your lips. If we really believe that things will not always be this way, then we need to live that belief.

Barbara Brown Taylor didn’t write this in 2020, but I think it speaks to how these words of Advent speak to a people who have had a hard year:

What if the main thing we need to repent of is not our arrogance, earlier she says our prideful selfishness - but our utter despair – that things will never change for us, that we will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess someone else has made of them, but in any case that there is no hope for us, no beginning again, no chance of new life? She goes on, “those of us who have committed ourselves to a life of repentance and return will never give up on ourselves, no matter how many times we have to repeat the process. We will keep telling the truth and turning around, every day if need be. We will never say never (I’ll never recover, I’ll never get it, I’ll never learn) Why? Because we believe in God’s goodness more than we believe in our badness.” (From her book, *Teaching Sermons on Suffering: God in Pain*)

I think we add in 2020, we believe in God’s goodness enough to hope even in bad circumstances for signs of that goodness: light breaking into the darkness, comfort for the people, an image of being held tightly in the arms of the good shepherd, us and all the world, for the power of the one who is to come, for the Holy Spirit.

Maybe we are more able to hear Isaiah, to hear John, this second week of Advent because we all want our circumstances to be different as we approach Christmas in the time of Covid. None of us are inured by our status, comfort or privilege to lose ourselves in commercial Christmas and be annoyed by John the Baptist asking us to repent, to change, to turn our path when we are perfectly happy with ourselves, what we have, and what we do, thank you anyway John. Wow. Not this year, this year John, I would like to know more, I’d like to get myself in a place, on a path, to see what that is going to be all about. From what we are hearing so far: hope is on the way and the world is about to be turned upside down again by the one who will come with power and might and turn out to be the shepherd of the people, the gentle one, the one that carries us next to his heart, the one whose glory is to be revealed. And to that I say, Wow.