

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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December 3, 2023

Isaiah 40:1–11, Mark 1:1–8

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Speak to us, Lord. Speak to us in the waiting, the watching, the hoping, the longing, the sorrow, the sighing, the rejoicing. Speak to us by your Word in these Advent days and walk with us until the day of your coming. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1–11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: “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.” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is an odd way to begin a gospel. Mark starts out, not like Matthew and Luke, with stories of a tiny baby swaddled in clothes and lying in a manger. Instead in Mark, we get the news of a Jesus fully grown. We get a weirdly dressed, sticky fingered, scruffy street preacher shouting at people to repent and to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

This is not the angels coming down from the heavens and declaring, “Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy.” This is not like Mary hearing, “Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you!” No, this is a strange man shouting words from ancient prophets and talking about a powerful person showing up with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is no silent night, holy night. This is no Jesus meek and mild.

The season of Advent is about preparing. And we are familiar with preparing. How many of you have made lists, and maybe even done some shopping preparing for the Christmas holiday. Or maybe you are currently preparing for a test in school before the break or preparing a deal or presentation at work. How long did you spend preparing for your wedding once you were engaged, or in what ways did you prepare your home before you brought your child home from the hospital for the first time? We like to prepare. We like that feeling of anticipation and excitement.

And so, John tells us to prepare and to make the way straight for the Lord. But the way in which he tells us to prepare may seem odd to many of us. In fact, it might seem counter intuitive. John tells us to repent. To repent and be baptized. Like the unusual beginning to Mark’s gospel, this might seem like an unusual, and certainly unexpected, way to begin this season. Instead of the joy of hearing that the Messiah, the savior of all the world has been born, we get the call to repent. The call to repent. It almost seems as if we should be in Lent and not in Advent.

To repent means literally to turn around. The Hebrew and the Greek that is used for the English translation implies both a feeling and an action. Repent means to think differently after, it is a change of mind, a change of heart. But this change of heart also must come with a change of behavior. When my children were younger, my wife Kelly and I spent a

good amount of time teaching them that it is good to say you are sorry, but that the words aren't enough. Sorry must also be accompanied by a change in behavior. That's a hard lesson for a small child to learn. In fact, it's a hard lesson for any of us to learn.

How many of us really want to be called to account? How many of us want to be told that what we are doing isn't acceptable? How many of us really want to change our behavior when maybe we like what we are doing even if we might know that it isn't life-affirming or God-pleasing? In his book called "Confessions" from 397 AD, Augustine of Hippo, one of the early church patriarchs, wrote that in his youth his prayer was "give me chastity and continence, but not yet."

The call of John the Baptist to repent is indeed a way for us to prepare. It is a way for us to be honest about who we really are and what we really need. And sometimes that's hard. Many people don't want to admit that maybe there are things in their life that they need to change, or maybe we are worried that it will be a blow to our self-esteem if we admit that we aren't perfect. Or if not perfect, that if we simply admit that we are not as good or as strong or as independent as we think we are. It a call to realize that we need God. We cannot save ourselves, only God can do that.

John's call to repent is a call to recognize that we don't always go the right way, that we may actually be going away from God, or going ways contrary to the path, to the way of Jesus. To repent is to turn around and make the way straight back to God. This might be a complete turning around, or a small turning, maybe just a small re-direction onto the path toward God. "What repentance does mean, is that we are willing to admit our mistakes, offer them over to God, accept the consequences of our actions and leave behind those persons or things destructive to our relationship with God." ⁱ

Toward the beginning of most every worship service on every Sunday in this church as part of the liturgy is the prayer of confession. This is a time when we recognize that things are not as they should be, whether on a global scale in the world, or within our own lives and hearts. It is a time when we may be honest with God about our shortcomings; when we can be honest about those things we should not have done, or those things that we should have done, or even just that prayer that our hearts be changed; that we have a more loving and self-less attitude.

And maybe the most important thing about this time of confession, is that we enter it confident that we receive the blessing and assurance of grace and forgiveness from God. We have the vision of hindsight as the people of God. We know that Jesus has already shown up, we know that at God's initiative we are saved. Our confession and repentance may come from a place of assurance of forgiveness. We do not confess in order to become righteous in God's sight, in order to attain forgiveness. We have already received that. We repent out of gratitude for God's grace that is already received.

This turning that John calls us to, to be sure, is an individual and personal turning, but that is not the only movement. There is a second movement that occurs. It is seen in the text from Isaiah that John the Baptist quotes, and that I read earlier. The people of Israel have been delivered from exile and they are hopeful about their future. God has restored their fortunes and things are looking up.

The first word to the people is "Comfort. Comfort." And the word in Hebrew is strikingly similar to the word "repent." One scholar says, dependent on context, the word for comfort can be translated as "to change one's mind," "to have a change of heart," "to regret," "to be sorry or repent," even "to mourn." For the people who have suffered captivity, exile, and dispersion, loss of loved ones, loss of homeland and freedoms,

their reversal will be one from anguish to comfort. From fear to hope, sorrow to joy, shame to self-love. From insecurity and uncertainty to the assurance of divine providence and care.”ⁱⁱ This comfort gives hope. Advent is about staying aware of the brokenness and looking to the future with hope.

And this is not a quiet hope. This is a hope grounded in the faithfulness and graciousness of God. One preacher says, “This hope is active and bold. Advent hope is not the same thing as optimism, which relies on positive thinking and rose-colored glasses. Advent hope in fact acknowledges the pain of present reality, but it also dares to see God’s presence in the midst of that pain. Advent hope, the hope of which Isaiah speaks, is grounded not in anything we can see, not in politicians or bank accounts or the market. This hope is grounded in God’s faithfulness, and for that reason, it is true, and real, and solid, something to ground you, too, in the weeks and months ahead... In the midst of despair, hope erupts... The complete fulfillment of God’s promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hopeⁱⁱⁱ

The response to this comfort and hope is for God to call the people of Israel to proclaim God’s goodness. Verse 9 says, “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

When we experience the good news of God’s love, the good news of a reconciled relationship with God, the good news that Jesus comes into the world not to condemn the world, but to save the world, to save even us as imperfect as we are, the response God wants from us is to turn not into ourselves, but to turn outward to share the good news. God wants us to be like John the Baptist.

We are to make the way straight for the Lord. John the Baptist spent his life pointing to and talking about the one who was more powerful that would come after him. John spent his time telling people the Good News about Jesus, preparing people to meet Jesus. Who is in your life, who is within earshot of you that may need to hear you talk about what you have received in Jesus? Who needs to experience what you have experienced? How do you help prepare the way for Jesus to enter into the hearts, minds, and lives of others?

And it just isn't about speaking, as I said before, words are not enough, actions must also follow. Although. Let me just say quickly that I realize that for some of us it may be our actions that are easier than our words, and I don't want you to hear what I am about to say as permission not to use your words. You must demonstrate your faith – but you must also be able and willing to speak about it. Maybe even joyfully and at the top of your lungs.

But back to actions. This turning outward, this preparing the way of the Lord, is also about our actions toward others. We are to demonstrate what it means to be a Christian. How we live and behave, how we treat others, how we love others is important. We have a call from God to love one another, and by loving one another people will see God's love. As one preacher says, "We are called to - in all things - word and deed, prayer and action, by what we say and do, share the Christ story and thereby draw others into our journey to the end of the path."^{iv} Because we are called to share the Good News, just like John the Baptist did.

Did you notice how the Gospel of Mark started? The very first words of the Gospel say, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." I am struck by the word "beginning" in that sentence. The story is just the beginning. Now, maybe the author of the Gospel meant that line as the title for the book, or maybe the author meant that this

story is just the beginning of the stories of Jesus in the book. But I think it can be read another way. I think, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” can also mean that the story continues, that this is just the beginning of the Good News, and that we are meant, like John the Baptist to carry the story forward. That we are still writing the story, the story is still unfolding, and we can play a part in making the paths straight for the Lord and for preparing the way for Jesus.

As Advent continues, and as we move toward Christmas, I invite you to take this time to do two things, to turn in two ways. First, is to go deeper, to honestly assess where it is in your life that you need to repent. Consider in what ways you may need to change, in attitude or in action, to prepare a place for Jesus the Christ in your life. Consider in what ways you need to depend upon God, and to ask God to help you to turn toward him. And then joyfully give praise that we have a God who saves.

And second, I invite you to consider in what ways you may be called to help prepare others to experience the Good News of Christ. In what ways might you turn toward others. In what ways might you more reflect the love of God to others. In what ways might you be able to declare, “Here is your God!”

During this time of Advent, during this time of preparation, this time to make way for God and point toward God, I invite all of us to repent, I invite all of us to prepare for the one who is coming. I invite us to look for hope. Let us turn toward our God and give praise in word and deed. Amen.

ⁱ Dr. Russell Levinson, “Making Straight the Way,” *Day 1*, 2011. http://day1.org/3359-making_straight_the_way

ⁱⁱ Anthea Portier-Young, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11-10>

ⁱⁱⁱ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/hope-on-the-horizon>

^{iv} Levinson