

Second Sunday in Advent
December 4, 2011
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“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” We hear these words sung by a clear tenor voice as we listen over and over to Handel’s *Messiah* during this holy season. These words from Isaiah that make a bold statement about God to a demoralized people.

In the sixth century BCE, Babylon invaded Judah. The conquerors destroyed Jerusalem, tore down the temple, interrupted commerce and deported the people. We can hardly imagine the misery of the people of Israel. For fifty years the Babylonians inhabited the land promised to their forefathers after they left captivity in Egypt. Stripped of their own identity, the structures that shaped their lives the people of Israel were demoralized and hopeless.

To this grieving and futureless people comes a word from God that touches their deepest yearnings and gives them hope. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty has been paid, that she has received for the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” What a tremendous burden to be lifted off the shoulders of a people who struggled with the idea that they were paying a heavy penalty for their sins. At a time when the people were convinced that God was so angry with them that the silence was deafening, the people hear the prophetic word which is their anchor. A voice cries, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Even nature will respond to this word from God as the mountains and valleys are made level and the road smooth. This will occur so God’s glory can be revealed.

Isaiah’s message of preparation, expectation and hope is proclaimed again in the words of John the Baptizer. The proclamation of good news in Mark’s Gospel does not begin with the birth of Jesus or even the birth of his cousin John. Mark begins by harkening back to the words of the prophet. “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 in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight.’” John clearly understood his call was to prepare the way for the One greater than John himself who was to come.

Listen again to the words of Mark, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” I am not sure John could fill the pews of any church in this day and time. John pointed out to people

the fact that they were not living in a right relationship with God much less each other. John called them to pay attention to what they were doing and saying. Pay attention to the exploitation that existed in their commerce. Pay attention to the prejudice that existed between them. Pay attention to the injustices that filled their lives affecting other people. Pay attention to what was of value and what they thought was of value. Pay attention to how they brushed aside their spiritual well being for what brought pleasure and excitement. Pay attention to what and whom they worshiped. Get down on their knees, confess their sins and repent, meaning get up and act in a way that exemplifies their relationship with the God of their ancestors, the God who had compassion on them, the God who was constantly by their side as guide and friend. “Act like people who believe in the God of salvation.” cried John.

John the baptizer did not fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He survived on a starvation diet of locusts and wild honey. He dressed in clothes a rummage sale would reject – camel’s hair held in place by a leather belt. When he preached it was fire and brimstone.

John reminds me of the fellow who stands on the corner
of Market and George Street at lunch time bellowing at passers by
to repent and be saved.

John bellowed at people messages of baptism as a sign that they had changed their lives. “Get up off your knees with true repentance in your hearts,” John would bellow, “Come wash in the Jordan as a sign of new life.” John bellowed about One who was coming after him, One whose sandals he was not worthy to stoop down and untie. That One was on the way so the people better get right with God.

John had gathered a following by time he made this proclamation of One greater than he who was coming. Can you imagine the reaction of his followers? They had to be confused about who could possibly come after John more powerful than John. John was the Billy Graham, the Jim Forbes of his age. John spoke the word of God to a people hungry for that word.

Allow me to call to your attention something I find fascinating about John. While John proclaims a future vision he invites us to look back. You see, repentance and confession both require looking back. Repentance and confession require soul searching, really taking note and honestly looking at our lives. Look at our lives through the lens of what it means to follow Jesus. Look at our lives in terms of what it means to respect the dignity of every human being. What it means to strive

for justice and peace for all people. What it means to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Repentance and confession require us to face the truth about ourselves and change the direction of our lives where our actions do not reflect the covenant spoken at our baptism.

Not only does John invite us to look back but John is retro fitted. John's camel hair outfit is centuries out of style, it is the kind of clothing worn by the prophet Elijah, one of the reasons some thought John was the prophet who had returned heralding the coming of the Messiah. John very clearly reminds us to look back, look back not only at our own lives but the salvation history of God's people.

This looking back is very different than the nostalgia that seems to become the focus of the Advent season in our world. Look back to understand the God who is active in our lives, the God who never abandons us even in the midst of difficult times. Look back and recall the promise of One more powerful than John who did baptize with the Holy Spirit and promised that Spirit's presence in the lives of his followers to the end of the ages. Look back and remember that the Christmas story begins with longing by the people: a longing by the people to know God.

Mark starts his telling of the good news with the reminder that Jesus grew up and boldly proclaimed God's kingdom. That is an important reminder to a people who tend to linger far too long at the Christmas manger. This baby Jesus will become demanding as an adult who calls his followers to live into their call as God's people. Those baptized in his name are part of a covenant people who clearly know what it means to be a follower. The demands of the Christian life are not always easy as we denounce evil and strive to live lives that declare God's love.

The words of Mark give us one more important reminder. Beyond the life and ministry of Jesus, God has promised a gift, the Holy Spirit, the continual presence of God that abides with us and in us always.

On this second Sunday of Advent as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the festival of the Incarnation we hear words of comfort spoken by the prophet to God's people in the midst of a difficult time. We are reminded that Jesus comes into the world so that all who believe might know the power of God's loving presence. John the Baptist calls us to look back at the birth of Jesus and be reminded why Jesus came among us. Remembering, John the Baptist invites us to look at our own lives and face the truth about ourselves. Facing the truth John urges us to repent, to change our ways to conform more with the ways of God.

Mark concludes this passage by inviting us into the future. He invites us into the future of the present moment when we strive toward that vision of a new heaven and a new earth; a time when God's promises will be fulfilled, a time not of fear but justice, truth and peace. All praise to the eternal God for the annual reminder that God does restore earth's own true loveliness once more. Amen