

2nd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.10.23

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." (440)

Repentance doesn't mean what you think it means.

A baptism of repentance isn't what you think it is.

The Hebrew original that's generally translated in English "repentance" is *teshuva*, meaning to return. ("Come back, come back. Come home.")

This, incidentally, is what was top of mind for the prophet Isaiah in the 40th chapter of this, the longest book of prophecy in the Bible.

As you might know, the prophet Isaiah was actually likely three prophets, prophesying from three different periods of time, which is to say speaking the truth of the time, though three different times.

First Isaiah prophesied from prior to when Judah would fall, but after Israel had fallen, around 590 BCE. Babylon had attacked and would attack again. The Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem. They would tear down the Temple. They would take the best people of the nation into exile, and leave behind the worst, most useless amidst the rubble to wither still more—the lame, the old, the young, the people who'd be nothing but a drain. The takers: you know. Babylon wasn't messing around. They had an empire to run, a world to consume.

Feeling this as a most likely thing, First Isaiah worked through the why of it all. What had the people done to deserve such abandoning on the part of their Lord? What had the people done, or what had they failed to do, to make it so the Lord would so evidently withdraw his favor, would even cast his lot in with Babylon—Babylon as the bringer of God's justice! Babylon as the doers of the will of God? Israel, Judea: these were to be a people of justice, but injustice had been let loose—and now Babylon would bring them down. They were to be a people of mutual care for all in their midst, but cynicism and self-dealing had become more than commonplace—and now Babylon would as if bring God's recompence.

Babylon: the hand of God. What humiliation!

Second Isaiah prophesied from exile, maybe fifty years later. The people were in this foreign land. But, you know, it wasn't too bad off. Just a strange stasis of living not in their homeland but also not suffering too terribly. They could live without trouble and make a living without hardship. They could marry, and even intermarry. They could have children, and many of them did, settling in Babylon as if it were home. But it never quite felt like home—if though to a few, not to the whole.

So, home: perhaps someday, home. “Comfort, oh comfort my people. Speak tenderly to the people that they have paid their term,” would be the words of the prophet which the Lord would have him speak. They would someday, most likely, be free to return, to experience *teshuva*, a repentance of the way that they'd been forced to live, a repentance in return to the way the Lord have given them to live, in a land of justice and mutual care.

As for the Greek original that gets translated into English, “repentance,” that's *metanoia*. This breaks down *-noia*, as in a form of knowledge, and *meta-* meaning behind or before or above or beyond. Consider: meta-physics indicates the reality beyond the physical reality, and metamorphosis indicates a morphing or change that is utter and thoroughgoing. *Metanoia*, then, is the sort of knowledge that is above typical knowledge. *Metanoia* is that which is beyond typical knowing. An utter and thoroughgoing knowing: a knowing yourself, what you've done, what

you've been up against, what you've aimed for; and a knowing the world, what makes it teem with hope and wonder, what rightly fills us with the awe—the sublime; what also makes it mired in unfreedom and dark determination and even tragedy. *Metanoia* is to know as God knows, which is to know God. It is to know with depth, and with grace and forgiveness and hope. It is to know with love, to see with love.

And, yes, repentance can have a hard edge, a *sharp* edge, which might be how you tend to hear it—because to know yourself is to know where you're guilty, where you've been wrong, where you've pursued that which is not God. But the sharpness of repentance, of this transformed return, isn't the sum total of it, is but a side-effect of coming into a grand knowledge that reveals (among other things) how off the mark much of your living has been—which is true for us all. We have all been off the mark. We have all sinned.

But hear this: if your repentance is all sharp edge, then the mind you've come into isn't metanoia as much as paranoia: paranoia, the sort of knowledge that's divided from itself, a mind running on parallel tracks, and which takes on an adversarial tone against itself.

It's distressing to me how much of what's fostered in many churches seems a faith more paranoid than metanoid. That God is watching more than that God is seeing, that what God has in mind for you might be frightening and not comforting, that what Jesus coming might amount to is punishment rather than salvation from a *world* that is punishing, saving grace from situations that constrict and confine and so often amount to but choosing from among greater and lesser evils. Truly, one essential thing to be fostered "in church" is the mind at rest, restful readiness for magnanimity and peace, a mind made still to know that God is good and God persists in regard to the creation that all might about in joy.

This, I think, is the sort of mind which John had in mind, if not fully yet as regarded his own mind, then at least the mind he knew would best recognize what was coming.

What was coming!

What was coming?

We're down at the river now.

Jesus was already born, was already grown. In Mark's gospel, the narrative we'll follow much of this year, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ is when he was already grown. No infant narratives here, no annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary, no journey to Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph, no angels or shepherds, no visit from Magi come from the East, Mark begins when Jesus was born and grown and yet off-stage, beginning with John who was his cousin, a little

older, a little more impressive, the son of Temple priest, a most vaulted position, a most venerable thing. But John had taken his own turns with that legacy. What priesthood he might exercise he'd do much more out of bounds. He was wild—where he came from, how he dressed, what he ate. He was a prophet more of the old school, speaking the truth of the time without concern about how people would react—way back then part poet, part journalist, part advisor to the powers-that-be.

But that was a long time ago now. Prophets hadn't been much important for a long time now, at least half a millennium.

Funny thing, though: the people came out to him. They came out to the river, confessed their sins, came clean about it all, whatever it all was, came clean as we might say today.

They came out in droves, came out as if there's some appeal in this, even some comfort in this, which the words themselves suggest there is. An ancient analogue for truth is sooth, as in soothsayer, and which evolved to be our current word, "soothe." The truth, apparently, can soothe—in all the good and bad of it.

The truth can soothe.

People were coming out. People were coming clean, in some hope perhaps of being soothed by it all, in finding comfort—and maybe even for the forgiveness of sin declared, which we might also not be hearing quite right.

The construction of this phrase could mean one thing or it could mean its almost-opposite.

A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin could indicate that forgiveness comes for having repented. You get it as a reward for doing what's been asked. You get forgiveness as a reward for finally coming clean.

This is certainly how it's been taught in much of Christian tradition and practice.

It could also mean "because of," as in you allow for an admission, a letting in, of all you'd prefer not to know of yourself because of this reality that endures, forgiveness—for-giveness, a thing that's given before, a thing that has indeed already been given, something you're granted before it's even something you need.

Which makes it so you can safely return, which makes it so what you'll return to is embrace, not a beating, not punishment, not humiliation, but embrace.

A baptism of repentance might indeed be possible, and even attractive, because of the forgiveness that underlies it, that underlies everything. A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. A baptism of repentance because of the forgiveness of sin. It is here: come and get it. Wrap yourself up in it, warm and tight.

For what it's worth, the baptism John offered is different from the one Jesus would urge, is different from the one you might have been baptized into—the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. But this one, the one John offered, would do for preparing the way. This baptism of repentance would do for making way for what was coming. It would do then, when first offered, and it might do now, as we prepare. Make ready our hearts. Make ready our minds. Prepare in them room for what grandeur is God. It's not what you think. It's far more of good news. *Far* more. So, fear not.

Thanks be to God.