

Sermon – “Speak Tenderly to Jerusalem”
Sunday, December 10, 2017
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
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Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming to the exiled Israelites a word of encouragement in the coming Lord. Listen to God’s word to you from Isaiah 40:1-11.

- ¹ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*
- ² 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.*
- ³ A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*
- ⁴ 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.*
- ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*
- ⁶ 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.*
- ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*
- ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*
- ⁹ 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!”*
- ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*
- ¹¹ 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.*

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Our second reading comes to us from the Gospel According to Mark, chapter 1, verses 1 through 8. Listen for the Word of the Lord to you.

- ¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*
- ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;*
- ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”*
- ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

“A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” An interesting phrase, this is. It may be heavily familiar to us, two thousand years into the Christian faith, but it is a non-obvious combination of words, and a surprising one, and we don’t always notice all of the pieces of meaning in it.

How baptism—a ritual kind of immersion in water—connects to any of the rest of the sentence is a fascinating question, but we are going to ignore that part today.

What, exactly, the word “sins” would have meant here is not even a question that always occurs to us as something that *is* a question, but it, too, is a legitimate matter to consider, and also one that I am going to leave for another time.

It is sometimes the inclination of the preacher, or of anyone reading this passage, to zero in on “repentance.” And not for no reason. John here is calling for exactly that, for the people to repent. To repent is to change course, to change one’s mind and purpose. Surely every part of ourselves which holds to any purpose out of line with the perfect and good purpose of God must, indeed, change course, and this fact, along with our never-ending desire *not* to change much of anything about ourselves, is so obvious and important that repentance, whether out of desire to preach it or out of fear of having to do it, is often the main thing, or even the only thing, we notice in a phrase of scripture like this one.

But words of correction are not the only kinds of words given for our benefit. Most often, those might not even be the words that first motivate us. It is something else I would like to put our main attention on today. John the Baptist proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” and I suspect the primary mover of people here, in his day and our own, isn’t what this baptism is *of*—repentance—but what it is *for*—forgiveness.

Forgiveness. This is a word we throw around effortlessly and constantly in the church. But the concept that word represents is staggering. It is nothing less than a shaking up and overturning of the world.

That what is legitimately owed must be paid, as a fundamental element of justice in the world—that what is promised must be given, what is taken must be returned, what is earned must be delivered, both good and bad—is written into the very core of our sense of fairness and right. Debt demands repayment, wrong demands consequence, and if we are prepared sometimes to forget this for our own sins, we rarely fail to remember what justice requires when we are the ones wronged.

Whole systems of belief are built on this. The concept of karma is one way human beings reassure themselves that the world works out, over the span of all time, to justice. Over the long haul, we would very much like to believe, all people will get what is coming to them, good and bad, and nothing more or less. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow. This is natural; it is fair; it makes sense.

But forgiveness...this is something else. Forgiveness overthrows everything.

Have you ever been forgiven? Profoundly forgiven, for things you knew rightly could be held against you for a very long time? Can you remember the moment in which you grasped the realization that such a gift was being given you? From God or from another person, comprehending that you are forgiven, for real, is a deeply freeing, overwhelmingly moving experience, something that transforms the world around you, offers you the opportunity to *breathe* again.

We do not always even notice the built-up pollution that has constrained our breathing until the air is suddenly cleansed. The world is full of our unkindnesses to one another, full of the destructiveness with which every heartless word or deed, large or small, saddles those around us with corrosive toxins that tear persons down. And for every tiny little bit of poison we ourselves add to the world, we know, deep inside, that we ourselves are the ones who ought to have to swallow it.

We do not need preachers to tell us this. Why else do we try so hard constantly to avoid seeing ourselves as guilty? If we did not believe in an ultimate justice that expects full repayment for everything, we would not worry so much about rationalizing the things we do. But our intrinsic sense of justice recognizes that it is our place to pay the cost of that which we inflict upon another, and we believe this so strongly that we expend significant psychological effort to convince ourselves, when we slight others, that there is some justification for our actions, lest we feel the full weight of what we owe.

Let me say that again in simpler terms: I think when we find ourselves strongly rejecting the notion of our own guiltiness or refusing to think or talk about sin, it is because *we don't fully believe there is a solution to it*. We dislike talk of sin mainly because in our subconscious understanding of the world, sin means penalty, end of story, and to bring it up is therefore to confront something severe. And so we might even hear John the Baptist's call to this "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" as harsh-sounding words...but that is only because we have failed to absorb and comprehend the phrase in all its fullness.

Repayment, yes, this we understand. Reimbursement, compensation, penalty and punishment, these we comprehend. But forgiveness, the cancellation of what is owed, the dropping of what could be held against us, this is beyond what we expect or what we are prepared for.

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 made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."

We are in the season of waiting. The ground of our lives is uneven. The mountains, the valleys, we know these things as old, and fixed; the formations built upon all our years of sediment and wear are to us simply unalterable features of the landscape of our lives. We are what we are, and that is all we can hope for. And the wilderness...oh, the wilderness.

Our language and experiences today hardly do justice to the concept of this word, wilderness. We hear it, and we think maybe of nature, beauty, of the splendor of untouched creation. But the biblical use of this word rarely is referring to those characteristics of wilderness. We are only able to see it primarily that way from within our modern, tamed bubble of control and safety. To the ancients, wilderness was to be feared. To those for whom all of human civilization was a tiny encampment, planted upon and barely able to defend its borders against a vast, treacherous, desolate world of wild animals, dangerous landscapes, and uncountable hazards and perils with no-one to come to your aid, sheer wilderness is treacherous and terrible. It is a place where even mere survival is always endangered, where the norms and protections of civilization are not present, where the meager tools with which human beings are equipped are inadequate against wild, assailing forces.

It is useful to remember, when reading ancient biblical texts, that this conception of wilderness is often or even usually the one in mind when the word is used.

So when we hear of a *way made in the wilderness*, this should speak powerfully to us. For although perhaps few of us have spent much time traversing the literal wilds of the deep forest, the desert, or the mountains, many of us have spent time in the wilderness. Perhaps you are there now, or you have been and you fear very much going back. Maybe you know well what the Psalmist spoke of in the words of Psalm 63:

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you;

I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.

I speak of this because Advent is not really just a four-week season of greenery and pleasant feelings, happy contentedness projected backwards in time from Christmas. Advent is meant to meet us where we are, in the real world. It is an acknowledgment of the wilderness, and of the waiting time therein. It is a light seen from afar in the darkness for a people clinging to word of a hope not yet realized; and you should be reassured that if you don't feel the joy, the cheer, and the seasonal glee that everything around you seems to imply you should be feeling at this time of year, it does not mean you are doing it wrong; it means there are parched times in the wilderness, and it is all the more for that truth that we need, and look for, the coming of the one who overturns everything, who tears down and builds up, the one for whom it can be said:

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill 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.”

For we have a promise of *forgiveness*. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and this is not when we shall *pay* for our iniquities but when we shall be *saved* from them. “Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God.”

The candles we light on each Sunday of Advent traditionally represent aspects of our expectant journey through the wilderness. The first stands for hope. The second, which we light this week, symbolizes peace, and this is fitting, for into the midst of our anxieties comes this word “comfort”. Into the midst of our fears of our own shortcomings, both the fears we recognize and those fears we keep hidden even from ourselves, comes this word “forgiveness.” Where we are troubled, a tender word of peace is spoken into our hearts from God.

Let us receive it. Let us accept it. Let us believe it. The whole of our faith is built upon this promise, that forgiveness is ours in Christ. Let us dwell within it, and let us moreover not fail to remember that we are not the only ones in the wilderness, to whom this promise makes all the difference. May God be with us in the receiving and the sharing of the light, in the getting and the giving of peace, in both the receiving and the speaking of tender words of comfort to the world. Amen.

Charge and benediction:

Here is my charge to you for this Advent season: Give freely of the grace that you have gotten. Do not ask yourself who deserves your forgiveness; forgiveness deserved is not even forgiveness, but merely something earned. Ask who *needs* your forgiveness and does not deserve it at all. And give it to them. That is, after all, exactly how we have gotten it from God, or from anyone who has ever forgiven us. And may God give us all the strength to truly live this way. Amen.