

For Our God
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December 7, 2014

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 for ever.

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.

Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As 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” ’,

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

In the November newsletter I first mentioned the Advent Conspiracy, a way of celebrating the birth of Christ more as the birth of Christ than as Christmas, and focusing on four tenets: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, and Love All. As this movement’s creators explain: “Christmas marks the moment where God’s promise was fulfilled and love took form, tiny fingers and all. It is a moment that deserves our full attention and praise.” They continue, “We put Worship Fully as AC’s first tenet because we believe the level of our involvement at Christmas is based entirely on how much we are celebrating Christ’s birth. He deserves celebration; one that is creative, loud, and directs every heart His way.”¹ Another way this has been said recently is “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

I’ll admit it has been hard for us to jump in 100% at our first attempt. Sometimes budget, especially combined with distance, makes it difficult to offer experiential gifts. Sometimes my creativity has up and walked away. And so, I’m left with lists. Like what do I get for my husband’s cousin’s wife? What about you? Are you in the midst of shopping / baking / decorating for others? For family, for friends, for whomever makes your list? Isaiah and John the Baptist, through the gospel-writer Mark, suggest someone has been forgotten on our lists. What, in all of your preparations, are you doing for God?

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” When this has been done, “then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” Last week, I spoke of how, as we prepare to receive Christ and as we help prepare others, our job while we are waiting is to not give up our own hope and to sow hope in others wherever we can. Today’s readings give us the

¹ Advent Conspiracy Church Resources.

“why.” We prepare ourselves and others for one reason, despite what the cookie and car and home goods and tools companies suggest. We prepare for our God. If we were able to separate ourselves fully from the world, as Christians celebrating Christ-mas everything we do would be for God. And I imagine that would look like fewer cookies baked and less opportunities to curse in a mall parking lot. The fact is that only Jesus is not of this world and so we are pulled by the world, pulled away from God and toward stuff.

If you wondered how John the Baptist’s message of repentance might apply to us today, the way in which we place importance on Christmas might be a great place to begin. Repentance doesn’t, at its core, mean beating our breast and wailing in sackcloth and ashes. To repent is to be penitent, which is to be sorry for sinning, which is turning away from God toward the things of this world and our own desires. Repentance is to be sorry for turning away from God. Growing up in the Catholic Church and going to confession, we were taught that our confessions weren’t true, meaning heartfelt, if we weren’t truly penitent. That stems from an understanding of our reading from Mark: John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In my upbringing, forgiveness was only given if we were repentant. As a kid, I had no idea how to measure this. How could I be sure in my heart that I really was sorry for hitting my brother, especially when he really did make me mad? As an adult, I now know. Repenting is only in part being sorry; the other part is actively turning back toward God, even if we struggle to remain facing God. After all the word is “re-pent,” as in re-peat as needed. And, as a Presbyterian, I now believe that Jesus has already obtained the forgiveness of my sins through his death and resurrection – nothing I could ever do, no works of any kind, could earn what he has given me.

As we prepare the way for God to be revealed in Christ, we are called to be repentant by shifting our preparations truly toward God. I admitted taking on the Advent Conspiracy has been hard. Shifting your preparations wholly toward God at Christmas is an enormous feat and cannot be accomplished overnight. We live in a world, and with families, who have come to associate the receiving of gifts with this specific day, rather than, for example, on occasion throughout the year as we desire to give, in the form of experience or even in the form of needed items that we can provide. Isaiah talks about preparations leading to the glory of the Lord being revealed. Professor Kathleen M. O’Connor offers that “The Jewish Publication Society translates this traditional Hebrew phrase with the richly resonant ‘Presence of the Lord.’”² Let the powerful weightiness of this, preparing for the presence of the Lord to be revealed, be what brings you to repentance each time you stray.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 29.

If preparing ourselves is not easy, preparing others can seem insurmountably challenging. Professor Richard F. Ward names the challenge in this way: “Take a look at our own world, and see how preposterous the message we carry will sound. It does indeed seem that the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ has very little power in relation to the other ‘gods’ that seem to reign in our ‘empire.’”³ There is no denying the task is big. The reason to take it on is bigger, though. He continues: “In the face of derision and indifference, we are to speak of this God whose fierce compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the other ‘gods’ who seem to enjoy sovereignty in human relationships.”⁴

It’s not bad to bake cookies and hang lights. Black Friday is only bad for your wallet and your back – in and of itself, a day of discounts is not bad. I love decorating for the holiday, I love putting up lights outside, I love decorating the planters outside my door, I love taking time to wrap presents, and I love shopping for presents, especially for the young people in my life. None of these activities are bad – they simply are not for God, are not preparing for the presence of the Lord. The older I get, the more I recognize the absence of God in my plans. This year my efforts to remember and prepare for God have included my attempts at the Advent Conspiracy and my aim to have everything accomplished by this coming Wednesday, giving me two full weeks to bring my attention more fully back to God. What little thing have you taken on already or might you take on in the next two-and-a-half weeks?

Isaiah says to prepare the way of the Lord we must make straight a highway in the desert, valleys should be lifted up, mountains and hills made low, uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Simply put, the task of preparing for the Lord is...not simple, not a quick fix, not achievable overnight. And preparing for the presence of the Lord is not just an Advent task. We come to Advent appreciative of the reminder to prepare because it has been so easy to forget in the preceding months. And so John the Baptist comes on this second Sunday of Advent with the reminder that it is time again to repent. I hear it for me and I repeat it for you.

Let us pray: Holy God, we seek your help in turning to you so that we might be ever more ready to welcome your presence into our lives and prepare others to do the same. We ask you to hear our prayer. Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*