



SAINT LUKE'S

ADVENT 2
YEAR B

ISAIAH 40:1-11
2 PETER 3:8-15A
MARK 1:1-8
PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
DECEMBER 10, 2017

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Handel's Messiah, the opening recitative is a tenor singing, "[Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.](#)" These words from Isaiah were written between 500 and 800 years before the birth of Jesus. But they are most fitting at the beginning of Handel's oratorio about the birth of Christ because these words are the beginning of the good news of Jesus.

The Prophet Isaiah is telling God's people that the exile in Babylon is over and that all shall be well between them and God. He is telling them that God is not holding anything against them. He is telling them God has given them a new hope and that they need to get prepare for it.

When Isaiah was writing, the general operating principles of theology were ones of reward and punishment. To their way of thinking, when something good happened, it was a result of God's favor. When something bad happened, it was God's punishment. When God's people were exiled in Babylon, they looked back to see what they had done to displease God. They remembered sacrifices to false gods. They thought about the altars erected outside Jerusalem. They knew they had cheated customers in unjust business practices. They recalled taking advantage of the poor. They broke the Covenant they had made with the Living God. Those are some of the reasons they came up with to understand why they were in exile. They looked back for reasons as to why something bad had happened.

I think this is still a common way of thinking for many people today. It is a

Santa Claus theology where we are naughty or nice and we either get wonderful presents or pieces of coal based on our behavior. We see this also in the dangerous so-called “prosperity-gospel” that says God rewards those who do God’s will with health and wealth. The less-expressed, but ever present, flip-side of this equation is that God punishes those who go against God’s will with sickness and poverty. This would be cosmic manipulation. Friends: this is not the Good News of Jesus. This is the bad news of human reasoning. The major flaw with this way of thinking is that we make ourselves the judge. This reward and punishment way of thinking is not only inconsistent with God as revealed in Jesus, it’s the exact opposite. Since the Incarnation of Jesus, our understanding of who God is and how God operates in our lives and in this world and who we are as God’s people has evolved. Not only has it evolved, it’s been turned upside-down. This is what we know about God from Jesus: we mess up, we acknowledge our fault ~ and we find mercy. We mess up ~ and we find forgiveness. We mess up ~ and we find we are loved all the more.

“Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

As Christians, we know in our heads that reward & punishment (Santa Claus) way of thinking is not how God operates. But knowing in our heads is not the same thing as believing it in our hearts, especially when the culture around us is very reward and punishment centered.

This is where John the Baptizer comes in. After Isaiah and the other Biblical prophets, there is about 500 years of silence. There are no prophets.

No one. Perhaps that was kind of nice: no one whingeing about loving God and doing God's will; no one harping about taking care of the poor and marginalised; no one saying the way you live your life matters. Maybe those were good years when people could do what they wanted. I say that in sarcasm, of course. But then, after that 500 years or so of silence, a voice finally cries from the wilderness.

That voice of which Isaiah spoke is whingeing again in Mark's Gospel: "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." That voice is John's. John is saying that which the prophets foretold is happening here and now. It's a voice that is irritating. It's a sound that says prepare for things to be different. Prepare to change. John is calling God's people to repentance and tells the promise of God's mercy. John is calling God's people to a change of heart. He is preparing them for a new way of thinking and being. This new way in Jesus will not be comfortable because it means changing how we operate in the world. It calls us from the comfort of selfishness and puts on us the uncomfortable demands of service and care for others...and also the uncomfortable task of letting others take care of us too.

This change of heart is also uncomfortable because it means that we have to be alert and that we have to be courageous. As an older, wiser friend of mine likes to say: "Be alert. The world needs more lerts." God calls us to pay attention to the needs of those around us. We have to be awake and alert to act in courage. In the wake of the #metoo movement, as a society we are awakening to...and acknowledging... and condemning the gruesome and alarming ways women are mistreated and manipulated by men. It's the end of

2017 and we are just beginning to scratch the surface of what this means. Sure it's uncomfortable and scary ~ but we are called to face it, to call it unacceptable, to take seriously the women who come forward, and commit to changing. This is one kind of change of heart God calls us to in Jesus. God shows us in Jesus God's intentions for us, God's loving and faithful purposes, and God's hopes for humanity. God's gift of this new way of living and being is found in the gift of God's grace. And the truth that is hard to hear is that this gift, this new way of living doesn't save us from the trials and tribulations of this life any more than it spared Jesus himself. That is because it is a message that the world does not want to hear. But this change of heart is good news. And we need good news in an age of bad and even fake news. This is real news and it is good.

And this is an example of where we are called to repent. The word repent or repentance is sometimes one of those scary, churchy words that runs the danger of falling on deaf ears too quickly. The word in Greek simply means to turn around. In other words, to repent is to stop going our own way, reevaluate where we are going and why, and to head back in a Godward direction. Whenever we hear a call to repentance, it's a call for us to examine our lives and our behaviour and to make sure we are heading in a Godward way: the way that leads to fuller life in God! John the baptist preaches this kind of repentance and reminds us that it comes with God's mercy and forgiveness.

This advent, as we prepare to once again for the birth of Jesus and as we eagerly await his return in glory, we must be reminded that we are neither the

cause of his birth nor his return. These are acts of God's marvelous and saving love for God's people. I say this because right now there are misguided Christians championing recent political tactics in Israel with the hopes of bringing about what they call Armageddon or the end times. They themselves are trying to force Jesus to return. This hubris on their part is at first laughable for its ridiculousness ~ and on second thought terrifying for the destruction and warfare it could unleash. God's faithful and loving purposes are never worked out in violence ~ and they certainly happen in God's own time. Human action will not force Christ's return in glorious majesty. Just like his incarnation, Christ's return will be an act of love ~ and real love cannot be manipulated or coerced.

In the meanwhile of Advent, may we be free of the temptations of judging for ourselves our level of worthiness of God's love based in useless ideas about reward and punishment. May we prepare our hearts for Jesus by examining our lives, and orienting ourselves towards God in repentance, seeking God's goodness and love. May we then be strengthened to have the courage to be alert and to seek and serve the needs of our neighbors. And may we always remember that the washing of water on the outside of our bodies in baptism won't compare to what Jesus will do in the baptism of our hearts.

✠ In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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