

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 10, 2023 – The Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:9; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As Christians we believe that we are living at some point – and we cannot be certain exactly what point – in a long story of God and humankind. The story began with God's creation of all that is, including human beings. We believe that Jesus Christ is a central character throughout – the eternal Son of God, agent of creation, God incarnate who lived among us, died, and was raised from the dead by God. A major chapter of the story will end when Christ returns for a second time and God's rule will be established in a new way. The story is a very, very long story.

Our lesson from the fortieth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah was written more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Isaiah was writing near the end of the fifty-year Babylonian exile of the Jewish people from their homeland. He gave a message of consolation and hope to a people worn down by political oppression. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." The exile would soon be over, for the Persians had defeated the Babylonians and King Cyrus of Persia was about to allow the Jews to return home. Isaiah wrote the words that Mark repeats: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." This is a vision of a blessedly easy path home, a straight path, the way of the Lord.

By the time John the Baptizer began his ministry of preaching God's word, centuries had passed. In the early 1st century CE, the Jewish people were living in Israel, but they were once again suffering from political oppression, this time under the Romans. Once again, the people of God needed to hear words of comfort and hope. John was "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," now predicting not the return from political exile, but the coming of the Messiah.

The message of John the Baptist is indeed a message of comfort and hope. He points to Jesus Christ, the savior for whom the people of God have been waiting and longing. But his words of comfort and hope are inextricably bound with a call to repentance. Like many – perhaps all – the prophets of God, John is not a sweet and easy character. He cannot be, for God has entrusted him with an urgent message for God's people: Prepare for the coming of the Messiah; make a straight path for God; repent and receive the salvation of God. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and many people came from all around – city and country – to be baptized by John in the Jordan River.

I love Charles Dickens' short novel, "A Christmas Carol." I recommend it for your Advent and Christmas reading. It is an interesting and powerful story of conversion. Many of Scrooge's experiences with the Ghost of Christmas Past and the Ghost of Christmas Present helped to soften his heart and change his mind. Perhaps you will agree with me when I say that the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, with his vision of a man lying cold, dead, and uncared for, his finger pointing at Scrooge's tombstone in the pauper's graveyard, put the "nail in the coffin," the final touch of terror that converted Scrooge.

I thought of this story and how Ebenezer Scrooge became a changed man when I was thinking about John the Baptist's call to repentance, especially as Matthew and Luke described it. They both recorded John greeting the people who came to be baptized with these words, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of

repentance” (Matthew 3:7-8; Luke 3:7-8). In other words, repent and let your life show your repentance, or else you will be punished. Fear-driven repentance.

Some Christian churches have manipulated their members with fear. You may know that from personal experience. The Bible certainly asserts in places that human beings should “fear” God. In this morning’s psalm we find the verse: “Truly his salvation is very near to those who fear him.” Those words may trouble you. Be comforted because the word translated “fear” would be better translated “in awe of.” “Truly his salvation is very near to those who are in awe of him.” In other words, God’s salvation is very near to those who respect God and God’s teachings, who have proper humility before God the Creator. A very different message.

John the Baptist always pointed to Christ. As recorded in today’s lesson, he spoke of Christ in these words: “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.” In the church during the season of Advent we prepare for Christmas, our yearly celebration of the birth of Jesus. But as I said last week, it may be better if we think of this season as a time of preparation for the second coming of Christ and the final establishment of God’s kingdom. We might then ask ourselves what we should do to prepare for the coming of Christ and the coming of God’s kingdom of love.

In today’s reading from the Second Letter of Peter we heard the perfect question for Advent: “What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?” How should we live now so that we will be filled with joy – not fear – when Christ comes? How should we live now so that when God’s kingdom of love, mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace finally arrives, we will feel at home?

These are difficult questions. In some ways, the answers are clear and simple: follow Jesus, become more like Christ, live a life of love, mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace. The difficult part is to do all that. If we are honest with ourselves, we easily recognize that repentance is called for as a first step. Who among us can say that we lead lives of pure “holiness and godliness?” Who among us does not have some need to turn back to God?

We believe that God desires to make a way into every human heart. God desires to make a way into your heart, for your joy and your salvation. Imagine for a few minutes what might be the condition of the path from God to your heart. As Isaiah exhorts us, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” In your heart, where is the path for God straight and where might there be crooked turns? How have you already worked to clear the path for God? What is your next task?

In the context of the good news of the coming of the Messiah, John the Baptist reminds us that we need to prepare for the One who is coming. None of us lives in complete alignment with the way of God. Each of us has work to do to make the way of the Lord to our heart easier. We all know the kinds of blocks we put in God’s way and in one another’s way. Now is a good time to examine ourselves and to clear the path for God to come to our hearts, with God’s love and grace helping us all along the way.

In this Advent season of preparation, never forget the astounding good news recorded in Holy Scripture: God is always at work to make the path of love straight to reach human hearts; there are no limits to what God will do to touch our hearts and draw us to God; and God will accomplish God’s purpose of salvation. With thankful hearts may we go on to prepare the way of the Lord. In the name of our Savior Christ, who has come and will come again. Amen.