

Problems and Promises
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian New Canaan – December 6, 2020

Please Read:
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

Today on this Second Sunday of Advent, I invite you to reflect with me on the problems and promises of our lectionary texts. The first obvious problem is that in these weeks before Christmas, with all the ugly pandemic and political chaos going on around us, we want to focus on the beautiful beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. However, the gospel writer Mark redirects us quickly to the banks of the River Jordan and John the Baptist.

John, to say the least, is a little prickly, and I have yet to see him in any manger scenes or hallmark cards. But for Mark, John begins the Christmas story.

John had a tough life, wandering around the wilderness as an itinerant prophet, wearing camel hair and sustaining himself on insects and wild honey. I am not sure what happened from the time his elderly father Zechariah, a Temple priest, foretold of his miraculous birth to his elderly mother Elizabeth, but it must have been somewhat of a letdown to learn he was not “The One.” He was not the Messiah. He was the one who prepared the way *for* the Messiah.

In our culture of success and stardom, it is hard to be the one who merely prepares the way. “Preparing the way” is like road work. And I have done road work, once upon a time. It is hard labor for little pay, and no one knows your name.

John makes the way straight for Jesus. Mark writes that “all the people of Jerusalem were coming out to him. Some saw in John the one Isaiah wrote about over 500 years before, “a voice crying in the wilderness...” Some thought John was the promised Messiah, the one to bring comfort to those who were tired of the *Pax Romana*, a peace the Roman army enforced with regular arrests, torture, and crucifixions. John prepared the way for one, he claimed, “more powerful than I... I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

It is important to remember that for most people, the wilderness is not a safe place. Whether, or metaphorically, the wilderness is a place of danger, of temptation, of struggle and violence. So, it is important to note that John is crying out in the wilderness, and he gets right to a rather uncomfortable point.

His message is simple: *You need to change*. According to Mark, John was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Repentance is one of those churchy words that makes most of us uncomfortable. It triggers guilt because repentance is associated with sin and most of us do not like the title “sinner.” I cannot tell you how many people I have spoken with who reject the identity of sinners in need of forgiveness. I think it goes back to the unfortunate but common religious experience of being made to feel guilty or unworthy. This is called “worm” theology and is a distortion or corruption of the Gospel.

It comes from a line in the Isaac Watts hymn "Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed," which says "Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" The idea of "worm theology" is that only by abasing ourselves are we able to grasp and receive God's mercy. The assumption is, if you induce enough guilt and shame, working people up into a state of such remorse and self-revulsion, then we will be relieved to repent and seek God's mercy.¹

But of course, that is not the good news. That is a guilt-trip. And I think that is very different than the repentance for which John the Baptist is calling...

Repentance in the Greek simply means *changing your mind*. And if you think about it, another good definition of "changing your mind" is *learning!* Yes, it is like our mission statement, "learning continuously." Getting new, truthful information. I think a very helpful way to think of "repentance" is moving from a frame of thinking that is distorted or less informed to a frame of thinking that is more accurate and better informed. Repentance is healthy when it opens your mind and world view rather than shrinks your mind and world view.

Take, for example, how we think about the wilderness. Theologian Delores Williams is an African American who sees the wilderness through the lens of the experiences of enslaved persons and the traditions of many American Black churches. Rather than a place to be feared, wilderness is a place of struggle *and* Spirit, both problematic *and* promising. It is in the wilderness where people meet God. It is in the wilderness where people experience liberation. The African American experience of wilderness is both sacred and struggle ridden. "For African American slaves," writes Williams, "the wilderness did not bear the negative connotations that mainline white pioneer culture assigned to it." Further, "The wilderness was a positive place conducive to uplifting the spirit and to strengthening religious life."² It is a place where black ancestors navigated difficult terrain, preparing the way for generations to come. *Wilderness can be a space where faith is cultivated and strengthened and where freedom is experienced.*

I think this best explains why "all the people of Jerusalem" went to John in the wilderness (1:5). They were drawn to a man on the margins with a message, the way to peace with God and the way to liberation from the oppressive monotony of life.

This is the way of Peace that we remember and celebrate here today on this Second Sunday of Advent. It is the idea of Shalom, "the way it's supposed to be." It when everything and everyone is flourishing. When we are in a right relationship with God and our neighbors, how Mark Labberton defines righteousness and justice; ordering our use of power in a way that is aligned with God's character!

¹ Mark Galli, "Asking the Right Questions," (*Christianity Today*, April 1, 2020), accessed online Monday, November 30, 2020:

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/aprilweb-only/23-51.0.html>

² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2013).

You do not need me to sound like a crazy man in camel's hair and eating insects to convince you we desperately need to hear again the call of one crying in the wilderness, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

But did you catch the difference? It is not a hellfire and brimstone, "turn or burn" threat, it is an invitation to be a part of personal and systemic change toward what is good, true, and beautiful, toward what is loving and just for all people. It is putting our hope in and aligning our thoughts, words, and actions with the person of Jesus, the one in whom *The Kingdom of Heaven has come near!*

Throughout the centuries the prophets call for repentance. In the 6th century BC, it was the prophet Isaiah who beckoned the people of Judah to prepare for the Lord's coming. Again in 27 A.D. it was John the Baptist who called upon the commoner and religious elite alike to repent and turn back to the Lord.

Throughout the centuries for us Christians, we are called to repentance, because as God's Kingdom continues to break into our world, we are called to learn more about it, bear witness to it and align our lives with it. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus gives us a new metric for measuring alignment with God's reality: Self-giving love. Forgiveness. Justice and mercy. The prophets declare that the future will be very different than what it is now. Therefore, we are to live toward the Advent of the new heaven and new earth with hope. Repentance, in a sense, is taking our minds off our uncanny ability to mess up our world, and to pay attention to how God is redeeming our world.

As Frederich Buechner writes in his book, *Wishful Thinking*, "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying "Wow!"³

To rediscover the Biblical notion of repentance, we must begin by meditating on God's vision of the new heaven and earth. Take a moment this week to sit down and listen to Handel's amazing interpretation of this Isaiah 40 text which begins his *magnum opus*, the *Messiah*. It is so beautiful... According to Isaiah, God's coming is good news and brings comfort to those who are weary and hurting! As we prepare to receive our God, we do not have to be afraid, but rather we can get up on a mountain and shout with joy! The image Isaiah gives us is that the Messiah comes to us as a strong shepherd who will feed his sheep, gather the lambs to his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep."

So, what does it mean for us to live into this reality? I think fundamentally we are called to live more vulnerably. To live into *this* kingdom means to risk more of my own security and assurance; to be led. To be carried. To be humble enough to identify with the sheep of God's pasture. Repentance means living into the innocence and naiveté of the kingdom of God, knowing that we at times will be risking our lives and worldly possessions for love, for mercy, for compassion. We

³ Frederich Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 79.

repent so that we and our neighbors will experience the *new life* born of God's Spirit at work within us. We are called to a "repentance that leads to salvation"⁴

Mark describes people going out to John and "confessing their sins." They were being honest about who they were considering God's revealed expectations of them. We must not be satisfied with the way we have always viewed who we are and what our lives are all about. We need to be willing to learn, to reimagine life according to God's *gracious* vision for us and our world, that we are called beloved children of God, heirs of the infinite riches of the Creator of the universe. As Peter Maurin once said, "The future will be different, if we make the present different."⁵

The real danger for us lies not in the more glaring temptations and sins, but in a slow deterioration of vision, a slow death to daring, courage, and a willingness to adventure where God's Spirit leads. We become too settled too fast, and too comfortable after only fleeting moments of attention to God's Word.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way, "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. *We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.* We are far too easily pleased."⁶

And so, as we come to the table, admittedly in the wilderness of this second Sunday of Advent, I invite you reflect on John the Baptist's call to repentance as a great way to prepare for Christmas. The prophets' words sound harsh but are healing. God is here for you now to experience the "wow" of *repentance*, because with it comes the "wow" of God's *grace*... God comes to meet our problems with promises of new life! And so, we prepare the way of the Lord by learning to receive again the One who brings light to our darkness and life out of death - the Bethlehem babe whose birth brings comfort and compassion for the whole world. Repent and believe the good news, for the kingdom of God is near!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen!

⁴ II Cor. 7:10

⁵ Peter Maurin, "Not a Liberal," *Easy Essays* (Franciscan Herald Press: 1984), 61.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 1949.