

Comfort
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Dec. 10, 2023

PLEASE READ:
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

In a recent Harvard Crimson annual poll of their incoming freshman class, 24.6% said they were Agnostic, 21.5% said they were atheist. These are strange numbers. These 18-year-olds at Harvard are four times the number of the general population who say they are Agnostic or Atheist... and while 43% of the general population identify as Protestant, only 6.1% of the incoming class at Harvard say they are Protestant. Also interesting is that Harvard's numbers were twice what was found in other university averages for Atheist and Agnostic responses.

I'm not sure why these numbers are what they are, but they indicate that the elite of our young students do not have, or have rejected, religious faith. This is a growing trend and makes me wonder what these students would make of our gospel text today and the one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

John the Baptist was echoing the 8th century BC prophet Isaiah who beckoned the people of Judah to prepare for the Lord's coming. The Jews had been released in Babylon by Cyrus, the Persian king, and looked to God as the ultimate cause of this new lease on life. They were free to go back to their homeland and to begin again as a free people. But preparations had to be made - a way had to be cleared so that the people could build new homes, new lives; a new community.

That's what prophetic voices do: they remind the people that God is a God who calls us to new life, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Left to ourselves, we tend to only think about ourselves and forget the poor, the hungry, the marginalized of society.

What's interesting to me is the Hebrew word in our lesson from Isaiah translated "comfort," *naḥmû*, has a more basic meaning: *to reverse one's mind- or feeling-state*. Depending on context and conjugation, the same verb translated "comfort" here can be translated "to change one's mind," "to have a change of heart," "to regret," "to be sorry or repent," even "to mourn."

There were many prophets since Isaiah, but in 27 A.D. it was John the Baptist who preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And in a time when social unrest and rebellion was in the air, many went out to hear this prophet, confessing their sins.

How do we respond to John the Baptist's fiery call to repentance? I've always smiled to myself at the absence of John the Baptist in manger scenes. Although each year at this time we read about the way in which John prepared the way for Jesus, you won't see John propped up next to the wise men and the shepherds. He would spoil the mood! We have a natural aversion to locust-munching John crashing all our holiday merry-making with his calls for repentance.

But maybe that's precisely why we need John the Baptist photo-bombing our so-called most wonderful time of the year, the hap-happiest season of all... We seem to constantly live in a state of denial. We live in an age of overwhelming random and senseless violence, whether on a UNLV campus this week or in Gaza in the Middle East, or in Ukraine at the doorstep to Europe, or in countless homes where people are struggling with depression, abuse and addictions, in a society that is deeply divided by the politics of anything from racism to climate change, to "He who shall not be named..."

Repentance, in the biblical tradition, demands that we face the facts around the chaos and confusion in our world and our own lives, but also the fact that it is the Lord alone who can save, who can help us to experience again healing transformation and renewal. Left to our own designs, we will wonder with the prophet, "What shall I cry?" The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the lord blows upon it; surely the people is grass..." Like the prophet acknowledges, we are on the one hand dust and must confess that all is vanity if left to our own devices...

But with Isaiah we also affirm that God cares for us, loves us, forgives us and calls us to be God's people. Isaiah portrays the image of God feeding his flock like a shepherd, gathering them in his arms, carrying them in his bosom, and gently leading those who are young. When we turn back to God, we turn back to a personal relationship with one who cares for us like a parent for their child, but also the one with the power to overcome the brokenness and sin of our world.

As Frederick Buechner writes in his "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!"

To rediscover the Biblical notion of repentance, we must begin by first acknowledging that repentance is the command of God not so that we will suffer consequences, but so we will experience *new life* born of God's Spirit at work within us. We are called to experience a "repentance that leads to salvation" (II Cor. 7:10). In this season of Advent, if we are to experience God's coming to us anew in the

here and now, there are necessary preparations in order to perceive and receive the Lord's coming into our lives.

The biblical goal of repentance is peace. Peace, our Advent theme this week, gets at “the way it’s supposed to be.” Peace, in the biblical sense, is flourishing, generative, life-giving health and strength. So first of all, we have to acknowledge those areas in our own lives and life together that are not at peace, not the way they are supposed to be. The people went to John in order to confess their sins. They were being honest about who they were in light of God's revealed expectations of them, which according to Jesus is loving God, and loving our neighbors, including our enemies. We must not be satisfied with the status quo of indifference and injustice. We are called to hear and live into the fullness of God’s vision for the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community.

The real danger for Christians is in the deterioration of vision, a slow death to daring, courage, and a willingness to adventure where God's Spirit may lead us to care about the poor, the oppressed, and those who suffer any kind of injustice. We become too settled too fast, too comfortable after only fleeting dalliances with God's Word. We are called to dream dreams, and to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination and much love.

I love how C.S. Lewis, the great Cambridge and Oxford don, once quipped, “One day, you’ll be old enough to start reading fairy tales again!” We’ve settled for mature mediocrity spiritually and socially, and that’s why we are called to reflect in Advent again on hope, peace, joy and love! We need to rethink what it means to live fully, to live generously. To experience Jesus as our peace. To experience the complete joy that Jesus promises. We need to think again about what love requires? For my neighbor? For my enemy? Ask these kind of questions, then listen carefully. Listen for God's still small voice to speak deep within, and listen for what God says plainly in Scriptures. As Jesus said, the truth will set you free.

Finally, we must be prepared to respond to God's movement in our lives. This is what Isaiah was proclaiming in this beautiful passage. Even though we may face valleys that seem to be without bottom, or mountains that seem too difficult to climb, God will make a way to meet us in our need. This is the "wow" experience Buechner is talking about, an experience of God's grace. God moves us to repent and leads us to act. God's word to us is, "Comfort, comfort my people." Our iniquity is pardoned and our sins are forgiven. God will bring change in our hearts and in our actions. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and *all flesh shall see it*. That’s the last point I invite you to reflect on... “and all flesh shall see it.”

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent, but also the 75th anniversary of International Human Rights Day... Charles de Gaulle appointed René Samuel Cassin to be part of the task force that authored the *Declaration of Human Rights*. He was a French jurist, law professor and judge. The son of a French-Jewish merchant, he served as a soldier in World War I, and later went on to form the Union Fédérale, a leftist, pacifist Veterans' organization. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968 for his work in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. That same year, he was also awarded one of the UN's Human Rights Prizes.

What most people don't realize is that Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, papal nuncio to France, encouraged and assisted Mr. Cassin in his work. Mr. Roncalli would go on to be elected Pope John XXIII in 1958! Less than three months after his election he announced he would hold an ecumenical council for the universal Church and revise the Code of Canon Law. The synod, the first in the history of Rome, was held in 1962, and the Vatican Council II also known as "Vatican II" was completed in 1965 and led to sweeping changes for good in the Roman church.

My point in sharing this history is to say that we need people, inspired by God, to hold up for us a vision of the way it's supposed to be by a standard much higher than our own. I'm not sure what the Harvard atheist and agnostics are thinking, but comfort, according to Isaiah, requires thinking again more deeply not just about what's good for you, but what's good for all people. So, take time to reflect on your life, and hear both the words of judgment, and words of hope and peace. They are different sides of the same coin. The message John the Baptist brings is one of repentance; but offers a new beginning for us and for all people! Hear the message, 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God... And then make the necessary preparations for the coming of our God. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy.

This is the way of salvation through the one who brings light to our darkness and life out of death – the Bethlehem babe whose Advent still means healing and wholeness for the world.

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