

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 7, 2008
Second Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:7-13
2 Peter 3:8-16
Mark 1:1-8

Last week as we began Advent, we learned that those to whom Mark wrote his Gospel saw themselves as part of a grand story, a story that will have its climax with the return of Jesus in a dramatic apocalypse.

In a sense that was a little awkward, because we began things at the *end* of the story, complete with images of cosmic upheaval and Jesus coming on the clouds.

For many, our reaction to that concluding part of the story is that we want to be a part of it, we want to be ready for it. We want to anticipate Jesus' return, not be fearful of it. So the question becomes: How do we go about that? What do we do? Where do we sign to join that club of those who want to be ready for Jesus' return?

Today, we begin to answer that question, as we are placed back at the beginning of the story. Today Mark introduces us to the story by introducing us to the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist. The beginning of the story finds John describing *how* people join the community of those expecting the return of Jesus in his dramatic apocalypse.

Here at the beginning of the story, John the Baptist is a person impossible for us to miss. He is not easily ignored, although that is what we might prefer to do with him. We'd like to pretend that we don't see him, but you can't do that to someone wearing camel hair. We'd like to pretend that we don't hear him, but that doesn't work so well, either -- for he is out in the wilderness calling people, and something about what he says is compelling people to go out into the boonies to listen.

We might consider John part of the "lunatic fringe," but if we want to be a part of the community awaiting Jesus' dramatic return, we must take our place in line, venture out into the wilderness, and hear what he has to say.

John's message to us -- and the answer to the question of what we need to do to join the community of those awaiting Jesus' return -- comes to us so powerfully, so clearly, so simply, that there is no mistaking it. For John's message to his first hearers -- and to us -- is simple and direct.

To be a part of that group awaiting Jesus' dramatic return requires something of us. It requires a radical shift in our thinking, and a complete reorientation of our values. Isaiah and John use many images to describe it, but its essence can be distilled down into a single, politically incorrect, emotionally charged, old-fashioned, biblical word. To join those who are eagerly awaiting

Jesus' return at the end of the story, those at the beginning of the story must.....
repent.

Ah, there -- I've said it! But John (and Isaiah before him) were way ahead of me.

You say, "pastor, we've heard this before. We've heard that we need to repent, to turn the direction of our lives, to prepare for Jesus' coming. But what does that really look like? What does repentance look like wearing street clothes?"

It's a good question.

Let's begin our answer by looking at Isaiah and our Old Testament lesson. The passage is a word of comfort, and actually begins with the word, "comfort." Anytime you begin a message to folks with a double dose of comfort, you know something is very wrong. There is no need of comfort unless there has been *great discomfort.*

Isaiah is writing to people of Jerusalem who were not originally swept away into captivity by the Babylonians in the 6th century B.C. When that happened, the city was ransacked, the temple (the dwelling place of God) was razed to the ground, and most of the people were taken captive to a strange and foreign land.

If the images on your TV screens in recent days have shocked and frightened you, read the account of the destruction of Jerusalem in your Old Testament book of Lamentations, and you will discover true shock and awe.

The devastation was utter and complete. And those that were taken captive to Babylon were equally devastated. Their pain is described for us in one of the Old Testament's most poignant passages:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept,
When we remembered you, O Zion.
As for our harps, we hung them up
On the trees in the midst of that land.
For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
And our oppressors called for mirth:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
How shall we sing the LORD's song
Upon an alien soil?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget its skill.
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
If I do not remember you,
If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. [Ps. 137:1-6]*

But the reality is, with the passage of time and the turning of year into new year, the memory of Jerusalem *did* fade in the people's minds, because they had lost all hope of ever being able to return.

And now, many years later, they hear the news that they have long since given up hope of ever hearing. The message: “your sad days are gone and your sins are forgiven.”

Then a voice shouts,

Make a highway for the LORD through the wilderness. Make a straight, smooth road through the desert for our God. Fill the valleys and level the hills. Straighten out the curves and smooth off the rough spots. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.

And then,

*Messenger of good news, shout to Zion from the mountain tops!
Shout louder to Jerusalem -- do not be afraid. Tell the towns of
Judah, "Your God is coming." Yes, the sovereign LORD is coming in
all his glorious power. He will rule with awesome strength. See, he
brings his reward with him as he comes.*

Do you see what's being asked of the people here? They are being called to build a road through the barren desert of Mesopotamia all the way to Babylon, because the sovereign Lord is going to return to Jerusalem on that road as a victorious warrior, bringing home the captives with him as he returns!

No wonder the passage begins with the words, "comfort, comfort." Years of accumulated hopelessness are about to give way to a mighty visitation from God. Decades of despondency are about to give way to joy, as people grab their harps from the trees, tune them up, and sing for the first time in years. A double dose of comfort is needed, for the people have endured a double portion of heartache for as long as they can remember.

Now after this long-winded tour through Isaiah, the question we posed earlier still remains: what does repentance look like, in practical terms?

Keeping Isaiah's words in mind, I would say this. I believe that repentance is most practically expressed as *courage*. Courage to change our actions where necessary, yes. But the courage I have in mind is something perhaps even more important.

The courage of which I speak is the courage to *believe*, to open ourselves to the possibility that God can invade the hopeless situation in our world and in our lives and make a new beginning.

Repentance begins when you can look at the failure, the disappointment, the hopeless situation in your life -- and summon the courage to believe that God is doing something new. Repentance begins when you can get yourself up onto the rooftop of your heart, and proclaim by faith when all evidence appears to the contrary: *God is coming into this hopeless situation!*

And we take our place with those who await Jesus' dramatic return when we summon the courage to believe that the way things *are* is not the way they always *will be*, that the status quo will not always remain so, that God is on the verge of doing a new thing.

Advent challenges and invites us not only to summon the courage to believe this -- but to live our lives in the shadow of this reality.

As we gather at the table of the Lord this morning, the bread and the wine speak to us. And if we listen closely, here is what they say: *Our God is coming!* As we meet around his table, may Christ give us grace to hear these words again, and the courage to believe them.

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