

Preparation
Matthew 3:1-6 and Isaiah 40:1-5

Isaiah 40:1-5

40 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

This is the word of the Lord.

When Heidi and I were expecting our first child, we read a bestselling book titled, “What to Expect When You’re Expecting.” It’s a good and helpful book!

Last week, the first Sunday of Advent, we reflected on expectation. What to expect when you’re expecting... a Messiah. What did the people throughout history expect in the coming Messiah? Who he would be and what he would do?

Advent is a natural time for *us* to reflect on *our own* expectations of who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and how he does what he does, why he came.

This morning our theme is preparation. Advent is also a season of preparation.

How do we prepare? What does it mean to prepare for the Lord's coming? In the language of Advent devotionals and music and teaching, we talk about "making room." Make room in your heart, make room in your home or your family, make room in your church. There was no room for Mary and Joseph at the Inn, right? So, how do we not make that mistake, and prepare well to ensure there is room?

In our readings this morning, there is some preparing that *God* does, and there is some preparing that *we* do.

God's preparing the way is done by leveling the ground, of announcing that everyone is on equal footing at the Lord's coming.

Our preparing the way is done by what we would traditionally call repentance. And that's not as awful as it sounds—so, stay with me! I'm going to talk about that first so no one rushes off or tunes out.

Before getting into all of that, the grace notes from our readings need to be pointed out. Please notice that forgiveness and the Kingdom came first, before

repentance or anything else anyone did, or does. John says, “Repent, *because* the kingdom of heaven *has come near*.” He didn’t say, “Repent, *so that* the kingdom of heaven will come near to you.” No, Jesus and the Kingdom are already here! The kingdom came first, not repentance. Repentance only comes first in the sentence, not in effect. Jesus said the exact same thing when he arrives on the scene: “Repent and receive the good news, the Kingdom of God has come near!” There is nothing anyone can do to bring it, hasten it’s coming, make it more effective, or even make it go away if they wanted to. Jesus and the kingdom are here, and here for good!

Likewise, in Isaiah, the announcement is, first and foremost: Comfort my people! Speak tenderly to them (literally, “speak to their heart”); tell them forgiveness and redemption are accomplished already. You are forgiven and loved, so now prepare to receive that. Not, do something to try to earn it. There is no cause and effect here, where a person’s words or actions bring about God’s tenderness or loving kindness. God’s lovingkindness is already present.

And according to the Biblical writers, the appropriate response to this good news of the already-present Kingdom is: repent. So, here is one way that we prepare, or make room if you will. Through repentance.

Now, I wonder what comes to your mind, or how your gut reacts, when you hear this word, “Repent.” The word “repent” often conjures up images of preachers wagging their finger and people being told what miserable sinners they are, and if they don’t get their act together then God will send them to the time out corner for eternity. There are a lot of negative associations with that word.

However, from reading the Scriptures, it appears that repentance for people was a positive thing. Something that created a good outcome in their lives, and therefore was actually desired. They came, first to John’s baptism, then to Jesus, after his baptism, to hear the good news of the Kingdom, which they were invited to believe in and receive as they followed him.

Today, the word repent suggests a sense of shame, and of being kind of a bad person and therefore deeply remorseful—miserable sinners that we are. And there certainly is a time and a place for appropriate sorrow and remorse, things we may shed tears over that we would like to correct and make amends for.

However, the word ‘repent’ in the language and context of Jesus’ day meant, to “change your mind.”

The Greek word used in the Bible for “repent” is *metanoia*, which means “around” “the mind.” A turning of the mind and therefore of a renewal of vision

and direction. It suggests that there is new information, or new insight, a new reality. And therefore a new way of seeing and being is possible. Because something new and better is at hand. And therefore, life changes can be made that reflect the new insight, the new information, the new perspective. So, there is a repentance, a turning, a changing of mind and vision and direction.

This makes sense of the announcement, where John (and later, Jesus) says, “Behold! The Kingdom of God is here! Good news! Come, change your mind, change your vision, and change your life’s direction. This is trustworthy and good; you can believe it!” No wonder people came out of the highways and byways to check it out. And to be changed. People were, and are still, hungry for good news. For something better.

Let me attempt to illustrate this by using a relatively modern phenomenon that happened in American life and society not too long ago. I’m indebted to a man named Dallas Willard for this illustration, and I am sure that some of you who had parents and grandparents who were raised and lived in the Midwest will appreciate this. Especially if they were farmers.

Dallas Willard had relatives who were Midwest farmers, and growing up he heard stories of life on the farm before electricity. Or, let’s say that electricity was

available, but only in the form of lighting! Well, it so happened in the late 1930's that the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) extended its lines to rural areas, and electrical power became available to households and farms.

When those lines came to their household, like all other households, a new way of living presented itself. For people in the Midwest at that time, their relationships to fundamental aspects of life—daylight and darkness, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it—all of that could be changed for the better because of electricity. However, a person had to believe in the electricity and its processes and the goodness and helpfulness of it; they needed to understand it (even if just a little), and then take practical steps to begin relying on it. Do you see where this is going?

The comparison is rather rudimentary, but it helps us understand the basic message about the kingdom of God if we pause to reflect on those farmers who, in effect, heard the message, "Good news! Electricity is at hand. Therefore, repent. Repent, or turn, from kerosene lamps and lanterns, from iceboxes and cellars, from scrub boards and rug beaters, from leg-powered sewing machines, and radios with dry cell batteries. Change your mind about all of this, and then change your life for the better. See it, trust it, and reorder your life so that the

farming you want to do, and love to do, is made even better. And your life is enriched.”

I understand there were some who just couldn't accept it as real, or that it was possible (“that won't work”), or they even saw it as dangerous. They didn't “enter the kingdom of electricity.” Some just didn't want to change. And others thought it would be too costly. But many saw it as a wonderful new reality, and found great delight and relief in the arrival of electricity.

And this invitation to repent, to change our mind, to acknowledge the reality of the Kingdom and change what we see and how we see and therefore how we live, is consistently before us. This isn't a one-time only deal, the way it is often thought of today in many circles: repent, and come forward for an altar call and then you have your ticket to eternity. It's not like that. God is in the business of transforming lives *over time*, and setting people on *a path* of making them whole, and joyful, and useful in the world.

For some, it is a large “C” conversion experience of repentance. But for most people it's a process of small “c” conversions (repentances) throughout our lives. Just like Midwest farmers had a large “C” conversion to electricity when it first came around, and then had to make many small “c” conversions over time,

probably throughout their lives, to fully live into the reality of this new and wonderful power that was at hand.

The invitation during the season of Advent is to prepare ourselves by considering ways that, because of the reminder of the good news that Christ and the Kingdom are at hand, we can change our minds, open our hearts, and let our lives be renewed by the already-present grace of God. We can let God “speak tenderly” to us—speak to our hearts—that we may experience God’s love.

“Repentance” can be as simple as doing some self-reflection, and taking stock. Without guilt and self-loathing! With a smile and a joyful spirit you can self-reflect and say, “I’m repenting!” Look what God showed me about me! Look what God is inviting me to let go of, or change, and in so doing make room for Emmanuel—the God who is already with us.

Paul in Romans (2:4): it’s the kindness of God that leads to repentance (not “the guilt-tripping of God...” or “the condemnation of God...”). Repentance, changing our mind, self-reflection, or however we want to frame it, is a *response* to God’s kindness, and grace. Not something that *causes* kindness and grace. As if *God’s* mind needed to be changed about us! God’s mind is already in the right place about us: we are beloved!

This is *our* preparation.

God announces *God's* preparation too, through Isaiah, when he says that he is leveling the ground, leveling the playing field so to speak, so everyone has access to the good news of God. Valleys are lifted up, mountains and hills made low, uneven ground is leveled, rough places are made smooth.

This is prophetic imagery again, and it's the prophet's way of saying, the ground is leveled at the Lord's coming. No one should be elevated above others, no one left lower than anyone else. Obstacles that prevent people from having access to God and the Kingdom need to be removed. Everyone is equal in God's eyes, is what he is saying. We are going to hear this same imagery in Mary's song next week, when she sings, "God has brought down the lofty from their thrones, and he has lifted up the meek and lowly." It's the same prophetic message of equity and equality.

Then, Isaiah says, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and *all* people shall see it... *together*. Not just special people will see it; not some people who get an insider's preview first, and others see it later. But everyone, together. Equally. This is echoed in the announcement of the angel on the night of Jesus' birth. The angel said to the shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which is for *all people*." Everyone has equal access to this good news.

We humans struggle with this, of seeing everyone as equal and treating everyone as equal. But God, we are reminded this morning, and every Advent and Christmas, sees and treats everyone the same.

In my neighborhood growing up there was a Japanese immigrant family who lived across the street from us for a few years—a three-generation family. The father told a story of a time when the Emperor of Japan came to the city where their relatives lived. In preparation for the emperor's arrival, everyone had to come down from the buildings and apartments to ground level so they would not be at a higher level than the emperor. And people from the farms and outlying areas also came up to see, as the emperor made his entrance on an elevated coach. Much of this was because of the code of honor and respect in Japanese culture for their emperor, that no one should be physically higher than he was. Yet this also demonstrates how everyone can be seen as being on level ground, together, equally, in the presence of one who is held in such honor. Rich and poor, farmer and financier, shop worker and educator, children and the elderly are all on level ground.

God prepares the way for the arrival of his Messiah by pronouncing equity. No one is more important to God, no one is less important. God has no favorite children! And everyone is provided equal access to this God and the

announcement of his Kingdom. There are to be no barriers that keep any person from hearing, knowing, and receiving the good news.

What's remarkable, and surprising, is that God's Messiah shows up, not as emperor, or monarch, or general of an army, or high priest, but as one of the people, on a level ground *with them*. With *us*!

Born as one of us, living a human life as one of us, without great fanfare or a show of force, but with humility and kindness. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So (in the same way) God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven."

As God speaks tenderly to our hearts, may our hearts be open to receive what God has to say.

O Little Town of Bethlehem