

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

We're reflecting on 4 of the classic Advent readings from Isaiah...

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 (well, mostly she read) a bestselling book titled, "What to Expect When You're Expecting." It's a good and helpful book, and I understand it's been updated since we read it 34

years ago! It's a month-by-month guide on what to expect when you're expecting a baby, and after your baby is born.

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, and 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 the way of the Lord" as Isaiah and Matthew put it? 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 from Isaiah and Matthew, 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, effectively announcing that everyone is on equal footing at the Lord's coming. God is

leveling the playing field so to speak, so everyone has equal 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 is elevated above others, no one is lower than anyone else. Obstacles that prevent people from having access to God and the Kingdom are to be removed. Everyone is equal in God's eyes, everyone has access, is what he is saying. That is *God's* preparation. No one will be favored, no one will be excluded at the Lord's coming.

Our preparing the way is done by what is traditionally call repentance. And that's not as awful as it sounds—so, please stay with me! That word and concept have been misunderstood and misused for a long time, and I'd like to rescue it from its misuse and renew our understanding of it.

Before getting into that, though, the grace notes from our readings need to be pointed out. Please notice that forgiveness and the Kingdom came *first*, before repentance, before anything that anyone 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. The only place where

repentance comes first is in the sentence. Not in effect. Jesus said the exact same thing when he arrives on the scene. The very first lines of Mark's gospel are Jesus saying: "Repent and receive the good news, for 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 and the good news are here, and here for good!

Likewise, in Isaiah, the announcement is, first and foremost: Comfort my people! Speak tenderly to them (literally, in Hebrew, "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.

Sort of like the communion elements are already present. And, *they* are given to *you*. We don't earn this; we receive the gift that is already here! No one is asking you if you're on the naughty list or the nice list beforehand. Same with the kingdom of heaven. It's already here, and it's all gift.

And according to the Biblical writers, one 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 this act called repentance.

I know, repent sounds more like a word we use during Lent, not Advent. Again, I want to rescue it from the way it's typically understood and used, because it's a preparation word. It opens our hearts and minds, and prepares us to receive something good.

The word "repent" often conjures up images of preachers wagging their finger and telling people what miserable sinners they are, and if they don't get their act together then God the judge 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 from the towns and villages and flocked, first to John's baptism, then to Jesus after his baptism, to hear the good news of God's grace, which they were invited to open their hearts and minds to, and receive as a gift.

Today, the word repent might carry a sense of shame, or of being required to believe that I'm a bad person and therefore I must be deeply remorseful. And there certainly is a time and a place for appropriate sorrow over things 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,” or “turn” the mind, or change the mind. Repenting signified a changing of the mind which creates a renewal of vision and mindset.

Someone translated it this way: “Think again.” Think again. We are repenting when we get to a point of saying, “On second thought...” I won’t talk like that anymore... there is a better way to think, and speak. “On second thought...” I’ll reframe how I view this person, or this situation. Or God!

Whether it’s “think again,” or “change your mind,” it suggests that there is more information available, or the possibility of a new insight, a better way of viewing reality. And therefore, a new way of seeing and of being is possible. Because something new and better is at hand. And therefore, positive life changes can be made that reflect the new insight, the new information, the new perspective.

This makes sense of the announcement, and the peoples’ response, where John (and later, Jesus) says, “Behold! The Kingdom of God is here! Good news! Come, change your mind, change your vision, and receive these gifts. 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.

My favorite illustration of this is a relatively modern phenomenon that happened in American life and society, in the Midwest, not too long ago. I first heard this illustration from a man named Dallas Willard, who was a philosophy professor at USC (he passed away a few years ago), 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. 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 could be changed for the better because of electricity. Their relationships to 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—to put this in gospel terms—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 the allegory?

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 overall life is enriched.”

As I understand it, 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” if you will. Some just didn’t want to change because their minds were stuck in the rut of believing “this is the way it’s always been done.” And others thought it would be too costly. But most saw it as

a wonderful new reality, and found great delight and relief in the arrival of electricity.

And this invitation to change our mind, to pause and think again, and to receive the gifts of Kingdom of heaven, is consistently before us. This isn't a one-time only deal, the way it is often thought of today in many Christian circles: you know, 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, there indeed 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 gift that was at hand.

This is a timely word because, collectively as a country, we seem to be stuck in what we might call first thoughts, in ruts of thinking that "*this was the only way.*" Or, more accurately, we're stuck in the rut of binary thinking. Where

everything is sorted simply into one of only two absolute categories. Where everything is either good-bad, right-wrong, insider-outsider, strong-weak, liberal-conservative, and so forth. And there aren't many people standing up to say, "We can think differently about this. We have other options." "On second thought... there might be better ways to go about our business as a society."

To use Paul's language in Romans, we need to "be transformed by a renewal of the mind." More importantly, we need God to speak to our *hearts*, as Isaiah puts it, not only our brains. It becomes a big problem for us—personally and societally—when we're stuck in our heads, and our way of thinking. There is a native American proverb that says, "You can't fix what's in your head with what's in your head." We need to let Creator God speak to our hearts.

Here is Albert Einstein's version of this, which is brilliant: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." In other words, the same mind that created our problems will not solve our problems. We need metanoia—a turning of the mind, a change of minds, to slow down, even stop, and let our minds find new pathways, new possibilities, new perspectives. To say, "On second thought..."

Because something better is here, Jesus says: forgiveness and reconciliation, peacemaking, and choosing love. These are all, "Change your

mind,” or “think again” ways of approaching life, and others, and society. They are “speak to the heart” ways of approaching it all. This is the Way of Jesus; it’s God’s way.

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, and 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 in fresh ways.

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; it’s a response to his speaking to our hearts. It isn’t 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! *We* are the ones who need to be open enough to let our minds be renewed, to pause and say, “On second thought...” I can reframe how I look at things, and how I respond.

As God speaks tenderly to *our* hearts, may our hearts be open to receiving what God has to say, and may our minds be open to being renewed in some way, to prepare for the grace gifts that God wants to give us.

O Little Town...