

12-10-17 Sermon: “He is Coming...But How?” – Isaiah 40:1-11

A voice cries out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!”

Christ is coming. That’s what we proclaim during Advent. And so, the prophets cry out – from Isaiah to John the Baptist, “Prepare the way! Get to work! Pull on your coat and head outside, because it’s time for us to clear the path, to make straight a holy highway in the wilderness! To clear away everything that stands between ourselves and God so that our Lord can come to us!”

This is good news...right? “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so?”

It *is* good news. But it also requires something from us. For the Lord we wait for during Advent comes to us both with judgment, and with mercy.

He is coming with judgment. That’s...not what we wanted to hear, is it? And to be fair, judgment is an emotionally charged word. So maybe it is more accurate to say that God is coming to hold us *accountable*. To take stock of who we are, and who we have been, and to help us become the people we wish to be.

We don’t really like to talk about God coming to hold us accountable for our actions, but we need to. We need to because Jesus Christ comes to bring us peace, and true, lasting peace is only possible with justice. We cannot have peace unless we are living in right relationship with God and with our neighbors.

Isaiah’s community knew a thing or two about God coming to hold them accountable. Today, in chapter 40, we hear Isaiah singing words of comfort, but if we read the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, it sounds...a little different. We learn that Isaiah is a prophet, sent by God to the people of Israel to warn them that they are on the wrong path. That they have abandoned God’s justice. He *begs* them to remember to God’s commandments, to practice compassion and justice, to care for one another and most of all for the poor. “There is still time to change your ways,” Isaiah says, but if our nation continues on in this path, there will be destruction, and devastation, and great suffering. “Woe to you,” Isaiah cries in chapter 10, “You who make unjust laws, and you who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people!” Sound familiar?

But Isaiah’s warnings go unheeded, Israel is conquered, and the people are sent into exile. They cry out to God but hear only silence. They begin to wonder if God has abandoned them forever.

We’ve been there, haven’t we? We, too, have given in to our own selfishness, chased after wealth, power, or security, even as we cannot shake that nagging feeling that this is not what God wants from us – or what God wants *for* us. As individuals, as a church, as a nation, we too have passed by our neighbors in need, have made unjust laws and oppressive policies, have deprived the poor of their rights.

We go with the status quo, in part because it’s just easier that way. But I believe that as Christians we know, somewhere deep inside, that if we continue down this path – if we continue to ignore the cries and needs of our neighbors – we too are headed toward destruction, devastation, and suffering. Because that’s the thing about Sin: it is powerful, powerful force. And sooner or later, it always leads to suffering.

And yet. And yet, during their time of exile, the people of Israel discover that there is something more powerful than Sin. They discover the power of repentance. They find that they *do* have the strength within themselves to turn away from sin and to turn toward their God, the

God of justice, the God who longs to bring them peace. And when they repent – when they admit they have done what is wrong and ask for God’s help in doing what is right – God hears them, for God has been with them all along. And God begins to clear away all of those obstacles and obstructions that stand on the way between God and God’s people.

“Prepare a way for the Lord”, cry the prophets, “Because God is ready to come to his people. Every valley will be exalted, every mountain laid low, every sin and burden cleared aside to form a holy highway. Let nothing stand between God and his precious, beloved people!”

God comes with judgment – to hold us accountable – and we are called to practice repentance. And yet, that same God comes to us with comfort, and tenderness, and mercy. “Comfort, comfort ye my people,” sings Isaiah, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her suffering is over.”

God comes with a firm hand, to set us right with our neighbors. And that same God comes with gentle, open arms, to tenderly gather us up, to carry us the as a shepherd carries a newborn lamb.

Friends, how do we receive *this* God? Repentance is hard, no doubt, but at least it’s pretty straightforward. We know how to receive judgment. (Whether or not we are *willing* to receive it is another matter...) But how do we receive the astonishing gift of undeserved grace?

We struggle with that one, don’t we? There’s part of us that craves this tender, unconditional, loving care, and yet there’s another part of us that pushes it away. We long for grace, and yet we resist it. What makes us do that?

Are we ashamed of who we’ve been, of the places that sin has taken us – so much so that we don’t trust this grace could truly be for *us*? Or perhaps we are afraid to open ourselves up, to live in that open vulnerability that grace requires. Maybe we’ve built up walls and defenses, let our own hearts become hardened as we’ve tried to protect ourselves from a world where sin and suffering are all too present. It can be scary, can’t it, to open ourselves up to comfort, to let the one we call our shepherd lead us gently, and gather us tenderly into his arms?

And yet, this, too, is part of preparing a way for our Lord. Advent calls us to practice repentance, but it also calls us to practice vulnerability. For as we go about the work of making straight a highway for our God, I think we will find that what we are clearing away includes not only our sins, but our defenses as well. That those obstacles in the road are not just the things we have done wrong, but also the places where our hearts have become hardened to a sin-sick world. The roadblocks on the highway of our God are the places where we have turned away from our neighbors, yes; but they are also those places where we have turned away from ourselves.

“He is coming...but how?”

Friends, He is coming to bring us peace. Peace requires justice, and peace requires vulnerability. And so our Lord comes with judgment – to hold us accountable – so that we might repent and change our ways. And at the very same time, our Lord comes with comfort and mercy, so that we might learn to trust and to open ourselves to the unconditional grace of Jesus Christ.

So, let us prepare a way for the Lord. Let us make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Let us clear away all our sins and defenses so that our God can come to us. Let us prepare *ourselves* this Advent for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is coming to establish his own Kingdom, ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ And at last, all of Creation will know God’s true peace. Thanks be to God.