

Preparing for Hope: Repentance

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

When I was growing up, a child did not take communion until after confirmation. Though I sat through plenty of communion services, I did not actually take part until I was 13. I remember that I had the notion that this was all about the death of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus for my sins. Maybe because it was a very somber affair, with elders in dark suits, and a white cloth draped over the table like a shroud. Maybe because of the talk about “the night he was betrayed, and the blood.”

I knew that it was about forgiveness. But it seemed that I was supposed to feel bad, feel sorry for my sins before I took the sacrament. And the more sorry I felt, the more likely Jesus was to forgive me. So I did my best to feel bad for my sins of 14. The message did not seem to be about repentance as much as about sorrow. It seems that it was bad news before it was good news. I was pretty sure that I had to earn my spot at the table by being sorry for all my sin.

In Isaiah 40, the good news comes first. Comfort, comfort my people. Tell them their sins are forgiven. Tell them that God is going to come all the way over to Babylon and find them and bring them home. Like it says in that song by the Supremes (which was a big hit when I was 14) “Ain’t no mountain high enough, ain’t no valley low enough, ain’t no river wide enough, to keep me from getting to you.” God is coming, and every valley shall be lifted up and the mountains made low, so there will be a highway for our God to come find the people who are lost.

Go tell the herald to climb a mountain and shout. Tell the announcers on the local radio station, KBBL 1040 AM (“All Klesmer music, all the time!”) to announce glad tidings. The Lord is going to come like a shepherd and gather the flock; the Savior is coming, ewes will be protected, and he will carry the lambs in his arms.

So the people in Babylon, those who listened, those who believed the announcement, who had been waiting a long time, began to wait in hope. They began to prepare themselves for something good. They lifted up their heads and watched for what God was going to do. They repented of despair, and learned to live in hope.

Now the writer of Mark picks up these images to introduce us to the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. He wants us to hear the glad tidings about the Son of God who is coming to rescue the people, like a shepherd looking for lost sheep.

The first person we meet is John the Baptizer. “Behold, I send my messenger, dressed very old school. He is wearing a homespun tunic, not some skinny jeans from the Gap. He has on an old, homemade leather belt. He lives out in the wild places, the wilderness where Moses traveled. He eats only the meals of the desert, organic locusts with locally grown honey. This guy might as well have a big tattoo on his arm that says “Old Testament Prophet – Born to be Loud.”

He declared a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Alle, alle, alle in free. Come to the river and leave your sins behind. Comfort, comfort my people with the offer of new beginnings, of second chances, of hope instead of despair, of joy instead of sorrow.

In both these stories, repentance comes in response to the promise of forgiveness.

Let me stop for a moment to define repent. It has almost nothing to do with feeling bad, feeling sorry for something. Sometimes that is a part of the decision, but repent means to turn in a new direction. Repent means to get up and start over, to change course. You may change course for joy, for hope, for relief...

If you came in here one beautiful morning, sat down, and found that the sun was shining right in your eyes. You might repent of that choice of seat, and move to another.

If you were on your way to church, and there was a tree down across your favorite route, you might repent, turn aside, and come by another street. If I get stuck out on I-95, and the highway turns into a parking lot, I love it when I get a chance to repent of choosing the interstate, and I get off and go by a back road. Man, Google Maps is great for highway repentance.

Let's say that you read in the newspaper that on a certain night, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn are going to line up in the sky. But you must leave the places where there are street lights in order to see this wonder. So you repent of your usual neighbor, you go out into the dark country side so that you may see something wonderful. You do so out of hope, and with joy when you arrive.

Some people repent of a career choice, and they get on a new path, often discovering talents and openings they never dream of in their old job.

Some repent of being on the wrong end of an abusive relationship. They turn and leave, and find that they are a beloved child of God, and not a punching bag.

Some people repent of an addiction or adultery, of greed and other bad choices, of sins, and they move in a new direction looking for relief, a second chance, a new start. Yes, there may be guilt and sorrow. But there is also hope that a change will make a difference, and joy at seeing a whole new way forward.

Some people in giving their life to Jesus, have a peculiar sense of remorse and relief. The sorrow is not about all the wrong they may have done as much as the sorrow is about having waited so long to come to the one who loved us first and who loves us the most.

John comes out of the wilderness offering a baptism, a washing to symbolize God's comfort, and the freely given second chances. I picture his TV commercial going something like this "Hi, I'm John. Are you tired of the same ol' same ol'? Are you worn out with all that you have to carry on your shoulders? Is your spirit worn out with worry? Are your feet tired of running so hard to stay in the same place?

Are you ready for a new beginning? How about a second chance? Would you like to get your record wiped clean? Want to start all over, go back to Go and collect two hundred dollars? Then repent of your routine in Jerusalem and come on down to the Jordan. Repent of your ruts and come to the river. Comfort, comfort my people says the God who loves you."

And then in a stage whisper John says "You think this is good? Just you wait, there is one coming after who is even better than me; whose glad tidings are far greater. I can't hold a candle to him. I can't even shine his shoes. He will offer you the Holy Spirit of God to wash you day by day, to quench your deep thirst, to guide you all the way home. This is just the beginning of something good."

So on this Second Sunday in Advent, a season of waiting in hope for God's gift of the Messiah, we come to the Lord's table. People shall gladly come from north and south, from east and west to sit together at the table in the kingdom of heaven.

Here is food to give us strength for the journey. Here is a meal to help us turn in new directions:

Repent from self-centeredness and turn toward a much larger experience of the life God gives.

Repent from anger and grudges, and turn toward a life that gives and receives mercy.

Repent from fear that it is all going to collapse around our ears if we don't fight hard enough, and turn toward the promise that God is for us and not against us. That the Good Shepherd gathers his flock and watches over them.

Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough, ain't no river wide enough, to keep the Messiah from getting to you.

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Where is one place you might repent this week, my make a change in direction, that would bring joy to you, to someone around you, or to God?