Ready for God: Prepare!

Isaiah 40:1-11 Kimby Young

Mark 1:1-8 December 10, 2017

The gospel of Mark does not have a birth narrative. Unlike Luke who tells us the back story of Mary and Elizabeth, who introduces the setting of Bethlehem and no room in the inn, who weaves in the shepherds and angels, and paints a picture of the birth of the baby Jesus in a stable long ago. Unlike Matthew who delves into the motivations and heroism of Joseph, who tells us about wise seekers from far away, who makes real the power and politics of the day, and who ties it all together with old testament promises of covenant and grace. Unlike John who waxes eloquently and theologically about the birth of the Word and the deeper, earth-transforming, creation-shaping meaning of it all. Unlike these other gospels, Mark starts his gospel with John the Baptist and in the next paragraph introduces Jesus – fully grown at the start of his ministry. Mark grounds the coming of Jesus Christ in Old Testament prophecy, and immediately points forward to the redemption attained through the cross. For Mark everything points forward to salvation through the cross. So this second week of Advent, in lectionary readings every year – we don’t look at the birth story, we hear from John the Baptist; we hear from the prophet - calling us to “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Prepare for the coming of the Christ. Prepare, for Jesus is near.

John the Baptist is a bit of a wild man. If I met him on the street I would probably be afraid, or at least wary. He spoke of sin and salvation and our desperate need to change. He called people to repent – which means to turn - to turn away from evil, to turn toward God, to turn from the easy way and to take up the “right” way. Honestly, his sermon is right on point for today. We all need to hear about repentance and transformation, right and wrong, sin and salvation, choice and sacrifice, good conquering evil. I’m not much of a “fire and brimstone” preacher. I don’t talk much about sin. But I know it’s out there. I know it’s in here. I know even sin is in me. And I hear John’s call to “get ready for God,” to get right with God.

Again – it’s an odd theme for two weeks before Christmas – repent and turn to God. It seems out of place. But it is the theme every year on the second Sunday of Advent. Repent and turn to God. Why? Why would the people who put together the lectionary many years ago define sin and repentance as a central theme of Advent – of preparation for Christmas?

Well, it makes sense. The most important part of this season – is not buying all the right presents, or getting your cards out, or planning your meals, or decorating your house or throwing a party. The most important part of this season is not the busy-ness of the season. These can be wonderful. They can be fun and fulfilling. But they can also be distracting from the meaning of it all. The most important part of the season is remembering Jesus Christ, focusing on God – whatever that means for you, whatever helps you to do that. The most important part of the season is preparing yourself, your home, your family, your church – preparing for the presence of God. Clear out all those distractions. Turn away from anything that separates you from God. And be ready for God to speak to you, to touch your heart, to live in you, to move through you. Prepare the way of the Lord. Because Christ is coming. Christ is coming to you.

That is the message of Advent. God loves you so much. God wants to be with you so much - that God is coming now in the flesh to be with you. And not just you. God is coming for every single person in the world.

So what do we need to do to prepare? The scripture lessons for today help.

In the gospel, John says repent. Turn away from evil. Choose good. So we are invited to look at our lives, to examine our lives and to refocus on God. Turn if you need to turn. Change if you need to change. Decide what’s really important. Get your priorities straight. The gospel lesson gives us guidance about how to prepare on a personal level – to get ourselves right with God.

But the prophet Isaiah, the Old Testament lesson –was not talking about a personal repentance, a personal transformation. Isaiah was talking about preparation on a much grander scale. Isaiah’s words guide us to communal, national, even global transformation. Isaiah tells us that our preparations for God go far beyond ourselves. Our call is not only to make ourselves ready, but to make the whole world ready for God.

The lesson from Isaiah describes a familiar reality of that time. In desert regions of that day, near Palestine, most people did not travel through the desert. The roads went around the deserts in more populated areas where it was safer and where roadways were more dependable, and this could add weeks even months to a journey. But in that day, if a king or an emperor wanted to get somewhere fast. They would send an army ahead to level out the dessert – to move the sand so that it was straight and smooth. They would level out mountains. They would raise up valleys. They would make a way. Isaiah describes God as a powerful king coming to the people. And Isaiah describes God’s people as the servants who go ahead of the king to prepare the way – go move mountains and level valleys. Go prepare the way for the powerful king who is coming. Go prepare the way so the king can come in fast to be with the people. Go prepare the way so that everyone sees what you are doing and no one can possibly miss the coming of God. In using this scripture during Advent, God is calling on us to change the world – to prepare the way, so that God can reach the people. We are not only to prepare our hearts, we are to prepare the entire world. We are called to change the entire environment – so that no one can possibly miss the coming of the Lord. Move mountains. Level valleys. Make a way. Shout and call out. Make sure everybody knows. God is here. Christ is coming.

How can we do that? How can we “Prepare the Way of the Lord” so that nobody can possibly miss it? So that nobody can miss - God’s love in Jesus Christ our Lord. That’s our call for Advent. Figure it out. Figure out how to change the world. Figure out how to tell people about God. Figure out how to move mountains and point to God’s presence. Tell everybody. Prepare the way. Seems like a pretty big job.

The scripture gives us three places to start. First, Isaiah begins with “Comfort. Comfort my people.” That’s a great way to begin. As we tell people about God we start with comfort, compassion, tenderness, care, the gentle leading of the shepherd, the comforting arms of one who loves. We prepare the world for God’s presence by sharing compassion and love. It’s a great message for Christmas – an easy message for the season. Tell people about the peace that is promised. Tell people about the grace and mercy of God. Tell people about the God who loves and comforts and protects those who are in need.

Second, in the gospel, John the Baptist begins with forgiveness. What the world needs now is love and forgiveness. Not forgetfulness, but redemption. Forgiveness. People need to know that there is a way out of the darkness, a path away from the evil we see all around us. God’s forgiveness lets us start with a clean slate. We let go of the regrets and worries and wrongs of the past. God helps us to find a right path and to move forward in hope. As you prepare the way of the Lord this season – practice forgiveness, teach forgiveness, empower forgiveness, help others to forgive and to be forgiven. Sin has no power in the presence of God’s love. Forgive, as God forgives.

So comfort, forgive, And the final gift for Preparation this season is in John’s words about Baptism. John reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit that truly transforms. Our call to “prepare the way of the Lord” – to transform the entire world – seems absolutely impossible if we consider only our human abilities. But the Holy Spirit – God’s power in the world, God’s power in us – the Holy Spirit can move mountains, can level valleys, can lift burdens and touch hearts. The Holy Spirit can transform us. The Holy Spirit can transform the world.

So friends, in the weeks ahead, in the month ahead, in the years ahead – let God’s Spirit move through you. Let’s God’s Spirit live in you that others may see God’s love in all that you do. You may not be ready for Christmas yet, but you can be ready for God. Be ready for God’s love and light shining in your life. Be ready for God’s Spirit to move over you and in you and thru you. Be ready for God to use you to show love to others. Be ready. Hear the good news of God’s grace. Prepare the way of the Lord!