

OUR PRAYER TO GOD

MARK 1:1-8

DECEMBER 3, 2023

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As we come to worship this morning you notice that our worship setting looks much different than it did when we left last Sunday. Our thanks to those who helped make that possible. It is what many refer to as a Christmas setting. But notice the Advent candle we lit as we began worship reminded us that we are not at Christmas yet. This is the first Sunday of Advent. There are others to come before we celebrate Christmas.

However, in reality in most churches we are an impatient group of people. We cannot wait to leave the more somber days of Advent to get to the carols of Christmas. It appears, though, that this is not a recent happening. Over the years there are those who rush to Christmas. Our hymnal, believe it or not, is a good place to turn to find out what people love to sing and what they will be willing to sing a few of, if the preacher insists. You can tell by the number of hymns written on particular subjects included in hymnals. After all, the publishers are wanting to sell books and why try to sell a book that people are not likely to buy if it doesn't contain the right mix of hymns—right as interpreted by those of us who sing them on Sunday.

So, on the subject of Advent, if you were to open your hymnal you will find that they are those numbered 76 in our hymnal and go to number 83. That means there are eight of them. While if you go from number 85 to 112 you will find the Christmas hymns which does not include the coming of the Wise Men hymns which most people consider Christmas hymns. Notice the difference? You see, we would much prefer to sing Joy to the World than Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus. We would rather sing Silent Night, Holy Night than Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming.

We don't care that much for Advent for many reasons. One is that if you read the scriptures that speak of the coming Messiah you will notice that they mostly deal with the insistence that we repent of our sins and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. This starts in the words of the prophets, then the voice of John the Baptist and after that to preachers of the gospel since the ascension of the Christ into heaven after his life, death, and resurrection. It reminds us that we are sinners and we don't like to hear that we are sinners. And, since he will return we need to repent, believe in the gospel, and be disciples.

Another reason we don't like Advent is because, even though we don't like to consider that we have sinned we all experience that feeling of needing to be rescued. Things are not like we want them to be. We are like the earliest of Israel's prophets, we want God to open up the heavens and come down to us. But we don't want to admit that we can't take care of things by ourselves.

And a third reason we don't like Advent is because we are again in the same position as the earliest of those who wished for the Advent of God found themselves having to wait for a time they did not know to hear the angels sing of the coming of the Christ child. So, as we await now his second coming we don't like the waiting of the promised return and we don't know that to do while we wait.

Let us look at some of these things we don't like about Advent.

The Old Testament passage for this week is that of Isaiah 40:1-11. You will find a common theme running through what we call Second Isaiah. It has within it some interesting comments. If you skip along to chapter 64 you will notice these words which continues to be our prayer: *"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..."* Another, *"But you were angry and we sinned."* Yet another, *"There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and delivered us into the hand of our iniquity."* And finally, we pray, *"Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now, consider, we are all your people."*

There are few other places in the scriptures that speak so eloquently and vehemently for an Advent of God. This passage can be understood as a longing for the coming of the one who would bring salvation. And it could just as easily be used as a Christmas text because the Christ came as both judge and savior—the one who would set God’s people free, and after the ascension it became obvious that we sinned and still needed God to return.

What was the background for such agony among the people? Why did they feel themselves so separated from God?

Well, you may recall that the chosen people of God were in exile. And you might also recall that exile was their fate because they had been unfaithful. They had sinned and as a consequence they suffered the humiliation and despair of exile. They were away from home, from things familiar, and especially they were away from the Temple, the place where they found and worshipped God. And, in such a predicament they had forgotten their participation in their plight and instead felt that God had turned God’s upon them.

You may recall those familiar words of Psalm 137, *By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” 4 But, how could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?*

Even the psalmist could relate to the words of the prophet Isaiah. Notice how the prophet phrased their experience of that moment. *“for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.”*

You see, living in exile and feeling distant they also started living in ways they knew to be inconsistent with their covenant with God. Our sins are even greater here in this place, they said, because you are distant from us. If you had not hidden we would not have sinned.

Now, where do we intersect this lesson in our living today?

This, the first Sunday of Advent, has traditionally been the time when we look at the promised return of our Lord. We can relate to the people of God in Isaiah’s time because we too experience God as hidden. And, as a consequence we do not live our lives in the shadow of the expected return of the Christ. It has been so long! So, we say, if you had come back as early as we expected we would not be the sinful people that we are.

Are we living as if we are waiting for the Advent of God into our lives on this the first Sunday of Advent, and expect it any time?

How do we begin to hear the word of God again? We can only do so by repenting and turning away from our misconception that we can save ourselves and admit that only God can save us.

This is where we hear the good news of the gospel of Mark.

The writer says in the very first verse, before he even tells us about John the Baptizer, that this is, *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* We have not even gotten to the appearance of Jesus. But, he says this is the “beginning of the good news...”

What is the good news? The good news is that John the Baptizer has come to baptize for the repentance of sins. This is the beginning of the *“good news.”* It is through the act of repentance that we begin our journey home. That is the subject we would like to reflect with you a few moments about this morning.

This is the time of the year when we all think of home. We think of childhood experiences of what Christmas was like. There seems to be a certain sentimental feeling about this time of the year in the memories of earlier times. And, for many, those were warm feelings when at least for this time of the year, even though all may not have been right with the world, there was a feeling of being at home—a comfort, a feeling of security, and hope for our lives. In this Sunday of Advent, we think of home—trying

to find a way back to God.

We are just in the beginning days of our Advent Bible Study. This study centers on the prophets and their call to their people to remember how they had failed to be the people of light they were created to be. But, as we have already begun to see the role of the prophet was to call these people home. We are invited to remember who we are and who God is and remember that God is always trying to find a way for His children to come home. In fact, the Old Testament lesson for this week in Advent talks about preparing the way home.

Isaiah writes: *"A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway of our God. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

John the Baptizer is one of those prophets who appears in the wilderness and suggests that we need to find a way back to our God. John is the voice that cries out to us: Prepare the way of the Lord. John came to point out what that step must be—he pointed out that the way of the Lord must be prepared, and that way is not simply a highway in the desert, but rather it is a highway in our hearts, a direction, and a step that we must take if we are to be ready for Christ's coming. We must be prepared to repent and receive forgiveness. We must also be ready to forgive.

In the Zen tradition of the Far East this idea is expressed in a story about a university professor who went to visit the great master Nan-In one day.

"Master," he said, *"teach me what I need to know to have a happy life. I have studied the sacred scriptures, I have visited the greatest teachers in the land, but I have not found the answer, please - teach me the way."*

At this point Nan-In served tea to his guest. He poured his visitor's cup full and then kept on pouring and pouring so that the tea began to run over the rim of the cup and across the table, and still he poured, until tea was cascading upon the floor.

The professor watched this until he could no longer restrain himself. *"It's overfull, stop, no more will go in"* he cried out.

Nan-In said, *"Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you the way unless you first empty your cup?"*

How can we welcome Christ, how can we enter the promised land with him, if we have no room in our hearts for him, if we fail to see that it is only God who can provide a way forward?

"Repent, and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins," he cried out, *"for after me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."*

Repent. What does the word repent mean? Quite simply it means to "turn around" to change direction, to face a new way, and to begin to walk on that way, leaving the old way behind.

Much as the professor had to empty himself to learn the way of Zen, so each of us must change direction if we are to truly see the Lord and walk with him from the wilderness to the promised land.

The wilderness we are in, my friends, is contained in our hearts. It is not what is outside that defines our wilderness rather it is what is inside, it is created by our actions, and by our inactions.

But those things outside do have an influence and they can, especially at certain times of year, point out to us just how barren and how unfruitful our present way is.

At Christmas time we more easily detect the hazards of a life unprepared for Christ Jesus, we more easily see what we lack, and more vividly experience our need for God, for something, for anything that will ease our burdens.

It can be such a lonely time. A lonely time, not only and not necessarily for those who are alone because they are widowed or single, or single mothers, but a lonely time for those who have no peace.

Even for those of us who value the "good news" of Jesus Christ this can be a time of year that reveals our need for a new way of doing things, a time of year that shows that we too need to repent, that we too need to empty our cups so that they can be filled with the water of life.

In many ways we all are in a wilderness at this time of year, a wilderness not of rocks and sand and thirst, but a wilderness that is just as desolate and which keeps us feeling spiritually dry.

Busyness is a feature of that desert, continual rounds of shopping and meetings and partying, busyness exhausts us physically and emotionally.

We are pressured to be happy, to be full of cheer, to enjoy ourselves, even when we are too tired, or wrapped up in a private and important grief.

We are in a wilderness both within and without, and we need the way of the Lord to be made ready in our midst so that we can emerge from that wilderness and come to the place where there is rest, the place of hope, joy, peace, and love, the place where our God resides.

John's words to us - are still important.

John calls us to the new life revealed in Jesus, and he reminds us that if we are to have that life, we must do just a little more than want it, we must prepare ourselves for it, by changing our direction, by doing certain things differently than we have done them before.

To repent is to recognize that the old ways in which we have traveled lead us nowhere, and then to turn around, and to ask for God's forgiveness and help, and to start walking in the way that leads us to the light.

Doesn't this sound a little bit like the parable of the Prodigal Son or Daughter. Having made their way away from God and home they come to the realization that they are far from Home and they yearn to be in a place where they do not have to sing the Lord's song in a place that is not home. They came home to find their Father.

God has come back to us in the form of this prophet out in the wilderness, God comes to us saying, "I will forgive you. You can come home."

Mark opens his gospel by saying this is "*The beginning of the good news.*" And none of our sin is able to defeat this beginning of the good news. The beginning of the good news is this. For us, for those who dwell in the land of darkness, light has come. God has sent John the Baptist out to us to proclaim to us the way back home. That way, that good news, has two steps to it. The first step is simple honesty: we sin, we fall short of the glory of God, we wander, we lie, we don't know how to save ourselves by ourselves. This is repentance, the simple admission that, in our sin, we need to be forgiven.

The second step is related to the first: God forgives. God in Christ will have much to say to us in the remaining good news of Mark. But isn't it interesting that the very first thing that God has to say to us, the first sermon in this gospel, is forgiveness? We can be washed, made clean, born again. We can start over, fresh, like a newborn. God forgives. Come home. God forgives.

This is the beginning and the end of the good news. And so, our prayer to God is that He open the heavens and come down to us again, so we may find our way back home.