

ISAIAH 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for 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."

MARK 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

THE HERALDS

Isaiah 40:1-5

Mark 1:1-8

Is anyone here feeling the need for comfort? The Judeans to whom Isaiah was speaking certainly did. They had been through a lot. Jerusalem had been devastated by the Babylonian invasion nearly a half century ago and many of her principal citizens, particularly artisans and government officials were taken into exile and had subsequently made their homes in Babylon. And even though life for most of them had become normalized—they had homes, jobs, raised families and existed—they longed to return to the homeland. Imagine if you had been captured and shipped off to the Soviet Union to serve at the pleasure of Putin. Think you, like Edward Snowden, would dream of returning home?

Well, we have been through a lot too in a very short period of time. Remember that a year ago in Advent, we were anticipating our family Christmases, enjoying carefree shopping—we had never even heard the term “social distancing”; let alone ever worn a face mask accept, perhaps, on Halloween. And, yes, political activities were picking up in advance of the first Democratic primaries, but who could have foreseen what unfolded in the next 11 months? And about 10 weeks later, we closed down church, went into virtual quarantine, lost nearly 20 million jobs, stopped traveling, started zooming and you know the rest. Do you feel better off today than you did a year ago? Do you feel a need for comfort? Do you dream of having your life restored? Then you are in the same frame of mind as the former citizens of Jerusalem some two and half millennia ago.

Isaiah heralds the fulfillment of that dream of returning home: *A voice cries out: In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* In those days, when a king was transported on a journey, an advance crew went out to smooth his passage by leveling the road for his carriage. *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. Based upon their suffering in exile, God determined that they had served their sentence for the sins which had put them there in the first place and were now eligible for parole. Their repentance had cleared the way for their release.

Six and a half centuries later, John the Baptizer enters the scene heralding another significant event in the history of Judaism. John is an interesting figure, a member of the Essene Community, a somewhat fringe Jewish sect which focused their teachings on the coming of the Messiah and the ending of the Age. Their dream was of a new world under the lordship of the one sent by God to save the people. And to prepare them for this divine intervention into human affairs, John focused his ministry on repentance and baptizing the faithful to cleanse them of their sins to clear the way for the Messiah's arrival.

And what does the Messiah represent? What will be the mission of the king Isaiah speaks of who will be riding his carriage into Jerusalem to restore it? The underlying theme of both these passages is one of transformation. Isn't it the dream of all of us to live in a world where people actually get along? It isn't necessary that we agree on everything. But the dream is one of peace and justice. It is one where prejudices and racism are dissolved and people truly understand that the only race is the human race and the consciousness of the world embraces our oneness rather than our differences. What is at stake is our future and how we live together or how we die together.

Both Isaiah and John understood this. What they also understood is hard work is required for dreams to become realities. The arena of inaction is where dreams go to die. And a crucial beginning to that work is repentance. By necessity, repentance is the first step in a redo. It is an arduous process of soul searching and fearlessly identifying the areas where we have wittingly or blindly contributed to the inequities in our society. What beliefs have we held that are just flat out in contradiction to the Gospel? When have we kept silent when we are afraid we might offend someone instead of speaking out? How much have we spent our time accumulating when we could have been sharing?

Repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry." Repentance is necessary to clearing the deck of all the mental debris that stands in our way of changing our consciousness. One cannot be transformed in one's mind as Paul says until one re-forms one's mind. *Preparing the way of the Lord and making his paths straight* is an internal process. As we noted last week, Advent is an event of the heart and mind. John baptized the people to cleanse them of their sin. It was preparation for a greater event: *The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

We know only too well—which the election brought clearly into focus—that all is not well in our country as we wade cautiously into the holidays. It is not well in the world either. The coronavirus has interrupted and contaminated our ways of life. And in so doing, it has illuminated our inability to work in concert to protect ourselves from it. Far too many people have chosen to ignore its genuine threat to all of us in favor of pursuing selfish desires at the risk of spreading the infection.

What that has revealed to me is that where our world has gone awry is with our consumer and tribal orientations. And when those have been our focus, we have sacrificed a sense of community. In many situations, we don't even know our neighbors and if we don't know them, it is really difficult to genuinely care about them. I have to confess that this is true with me. I can't tell you the names of all the families on my block. I know their faces, but we are like little islands and only relate to each other superficially and anecdotally. It is only because my garden is in the front yard that I have met many of my neighbors.

It is symptomatic of a deeper societal problem which you could see with the election analysis of where each candidate's supporters resided. In any given state, blue areas were like islands surrounded by a sea of red. Our rural and our urban and suburban citizens are as divided as if we lived in separate nations. And clearly, that is also a reflection of culture, race, theology and worldview.

Nevertheless, we need to be aware of this and realize that God doesn't pick and choose

us based upon our human characteristics. Being baptized in the Holy Spirit means that we share God's dream for us. God dreams of us being peaceful, justice seeking people who love our neighbors as ourselves. This is indeed God's dream for us. What is our dream for ourselves?

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