

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Second Sunday of Advent - Year B

38th Sunday of Quarantine (40th Overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

12/06/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

1The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' " 4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And 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. 6Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He 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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Prepare the Way

Good morning! I have talked about Camp Luther a lot in my life. But that is because it has been a foundational experience. So every summer, beginning around the 4th grade, I got on a charter bus in Wheeling, WV and took the 4-5ish hour drive to Cowen, WV. And in the middle of nowhere, many of us found a place that remains so special. But for all that it meant to us, I have often wondered what specifically made it mean so much. Sure, the people, the friendships, the time away, and the chance to grow in our faith are dominant factors, but I think that the experience was so powerful for so many of us because of what it offered: a chance to be the person that you have always wanted to be.

I'm not saying that we were fake, but for one week a year we were able to cast off our baggage, and start fresh, to be something and someone better. Think about it, I spent last week with my family and it's so weird to watch yourself fall into old patterns of behavior. It's like the weight of our pasts, whether it be good or bad, squeezes us into who we are "expected" to be. But at Camp Luther... everything was new! The mistakes of your past became lessons that informed who you were, but that didn't become a backstory for your new friends. You were able to be the best version of yourself, to turn away from all your bad habits and be someone better. To turn away... or turn around... to be repentant...

In Greek, the word used for repentance is metanoia (μετάνοια), and within its meaning is a sense of literally turning around, of turning away from your mistakes. And it's this chance of starting anew that John the

Baptist offers in today's Gospel reading. In fact, all of our lectionary readings are rich with this sense of starting fresh.

We see it so beautifully in our first reading from the Gospel and Isaiah. But in order to understand the importance of what it means. The book of Isaiah comes to us in our Bible in one neat little package. But in reality, it's an anthology and prophecy that covers several decades of Israel's history. Scholars split the book into three different sections all written at different times and by different authors. The titles and authors are creatively titled Isaiah 1, 2, and 3. The first section comprises chapters 1-39, and are the story of how Israel had fallen, turned away from God. Isaiah tries to warn Israel and its king, but they ignore the message. And eventually this leads to the Babylonian captivity in 587 B.C.E. where large groups of people were taken away, the population was broken up. And so the first 39 chapters are a growing warning for God's people, and the following result of their disobedience, showing their sorrow and pain when they arrive in Babylon.

But! Isaiah 2 starts with chapter 40, what we read today, and in it the people of God learn that their suffering will be over soon, they will return to Jerusalem! They are able to start over again, and God is preparing the way for them! The wilderness is being prepared, the roads will lead straight home! And so the people of God wait and make ready. They wait in expectation for the advent of something new.

It's a funny word, that advent. Merriam-Webster defines it as "*a coming into being or use.*"¹ And in the church we use it to mean the beginning of our church year and the four weeks leading up to Christmas. It's strange how those words can feel so different for us, one tied so closely

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Advent>

to the church while the other is used in everyday language when discussing something's creation in the past tense. One word with two meanings, only separated by our decision to capitalize the first letter or not. And yet... maybe Advent is something more.

For the early Christian church it was a sign of God's wonderful work. They saw the miracle of Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension and made connections with God's wonderful work for Israel all those years earlier. In the person of John the Baptist they were reminded of God's promise of salvation. And so they rightly realized that they had witnessed the advent of something new.

But that advent didn't just begin there! While this season of the Church year is dominated by our focus on the birth of Christ, Advent isn't just about that wonderful story in our Gospels but about the future advent of Christ's return! It becomes a reminder that God is always about to do something new and astounding.

Which brings us back to Camp Luther. Regardless of what happened, there was always next year. Camp Luther would be waiting again to offer us that fresh start. So even after a terrible year, we knew we could arrive in those beautiful hills and turn back to who God was calling us to be. It's that chance at something better that God offers for us here in Advent. 2020 has been a horrible year for so many of us, but God has elected one to proclaim a wonderful message: *"1Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak 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. 3A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4Every 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. 5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*² It’s never too late to stop being who you think you need to be, and finally start being what God always knew you were. Amen.

² Isaiah 40:1-5