



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, December 6, 2020

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A long time ago in a land far, far away, there was a man who spoke words he'd been given by God; words so beautiful, so important that they have been read and said and sung for millennia. But more than that, they were prophetic words.

And this man spoke his words of comfort to the children of Israel at a time of great calamity, loss and chaos – his people had been brutally treated in war and were in exile. So, the way things had been were now changed and gone forever, and the future was bleak and unknown. And he spoke comfort into this tough and barren place. He spoke words of comfort not because the people were particularly resilient, strong, or courageous, but simply because his people were in need of comfort – God's comfort. And reading these beautiful words today, we're reminded at how radical these words of comfort were and are:

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

It seems that the whole creation will be reordered and remade in the kingdom of the Lord. But such are God's promises. They remake us.

Isaiah spoke his truth in a time when hope and belief were hard.

And many hundreds of years later – scholars think about 750 years later – another man, another writer in another time when hope and belief were hard for other reasons - was writing so urgently that in the original Greek he breathlessly uses a phrase over and over - "Kai thus, Kai thus, Kai thus" and then immediately, and then immediately, and then immediately" to describe what he called the good news of Jesus Christ. That was of course the Gospel writer St. Mark.

You can feel the urgency with which that man was writing this story – because it’s short and it’s bare bones – not a whole lot of detail. It’s like he has to get it out to us with not another minute wasted. We must know it right away.

He writes as a man who knows that an answer has been given to a question that has been asked for hundreds and hundreds of years. So he situates the whole story within the older story of that prophet Isaiah. Isaiah who foretold the coming of the Lord whose glory will be revealed, who will feed his flock like a shepherd. Because, Mark, along with Matthew and Luke and later John, all see in Jesus of Nazareth and John the Baptist, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

But he also begins his account with something that was entirely in line with this expectation. He starts with describing John the Baptist’s call for repentance.

And that makes sense because John the Baptist, begins to talk about this thing called repentance just as the prophets of old did. They knew that their job was to get the people to come close to God again. And repentance was the vehicle for that. What is it? Well, we often think repentance just means merely saying sorry. But repentance in the Bible is something far deeper and more profound than that. It’s a call to us to make a radical turn from one way of life to another. The repentance that John the Baptist calls for is a summons to a kind of personal surrender to God’s love.

Of course it includes sorrow and regret, how could it not? But it’s deeper and more focused than that. It’s a call to conversion or turning from self-love, self-trust, and self-assertion to obedient trust and commitment to God. It is a change of mind that involves a conscious turning away from actions, attitudes and thoughts that conflict with how God wants us to live, and an intentional turning toward doing that which pleases God. In repenting we make a complete change of direction toward the Lord.

It’s that sort of presence to and appreciation of the gift of faith and the consequences of that decision to embrace it that John the Baptist is urging his people to. It’s a serious thing.

Well what shall we say about John the Baptizer himself? He’s not an easy figure. He makes us uncomfortable with his uncompromising statements and his ‘go big or go home’ approach to discipleship. But the fact remains that he is a huge figure in the story of God’s people. John the Baptist is known as many things. He is called the hinge of biblical history because he stands in the tradition of the great prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Hosea, Daniel and the rest of the boys - all of whom had that same one purpose: to call the people of Israel back to God.

Except there's a difference that sets him apart from that tradition, because John had something they did not and this is why he's that hinge; He had not only persuasive words and the example of a radically – and maybe intimidatingly - godly life, but he had the knowledge that the Messiah – Jesus – was on his way – imminently – right behind him. In that sense his mission and identity were quite different from the Old Testament prophets. In that sense, he also ushers in the New Testament. He is a transitional figure in the story of salvation history.

And his message – ‘repent for the kingdom of God has come near’ – again this is a transitional message. John says not only are the people of God called back to God - to God's ways, to build the kingdom, but – and here's where it gets really interesting - that the kingdom of God is about to come near to them in the person of Jesus the Messiah!!

You see, it's not a one-way street this kingdom-seeking. Jesus has been sent by the Father to show us the breadth and depth and demands and gifts of God's love and John is well aware that his position is unique as the person who runs ahead warning everyone of the Messiah's approach – as the one who comes before – but yet not THE One. He was always clear about that.

And it seems that not only John knew who he was but also the earliest Christians recognized his tremendous importance – as the hinge, the forerunner, and the herald.

But one of the things that I recognize in John – and if I'm honest, am perhaps a little intimidated by, is his uncompromising integrity. I suppose we all should be. But John possessed it: integrity in the true sense of the word – he was whole – wholly other – wholly given to God's will for his life – wholly committed to holiness and righteousness. When I hear John denouncing hypocrisy, and when I hear him criticize those who are self-satisfied and self-centred, I certainly don't feel myself standing with John, I feel a little less sure of myself than that!

But that's as it should be really. The wholeness of John's commitment is a prompt for me to look at the ways that I may lack it. It may sound harsh, but the reality is, we are all at times in need of the fresh word of repentance – of a spur to act in the areas of our lives we have shielded from God's view. Those small secrets that we keep even from ourselves – and perhaps the larger ones that lay a darkness over our lives that is not healthy or whole.

John knew about these things – knew how easily we can be corrupted – knew how easily we can corrupt ourselves. He knew about the evasions we practice when we don't have the energy for the commitment to what we say we believe. He knew that sometimes only a tough word – a true word will do. That's what we might call unsurprisingly, a ‘come-to-Jesus’ talk. And John had a lot of them with his people – especially with the religious leaders. That's how he fulfilled the scriptures by preparing the way of the Lord. It was his top priority.

John performed baptisms – baptisms that need to be understood in the way that his people understood them. John was a thinker who was outside the box. He was challenging because he understood that preserving the spiritual status quo was no longer acceptable. What the people needed was that 180 degree turnaround that true repentance involves. And so he did something that signified that change: he baptized them.

And this has to be understood as a break with who they were formerly and a rebirth into something new. This was full-body immersion in the Jordan – the symbolism is intense. As you go down into the water, it is like a death – a death of the old person, and as you come up out of it, re-birth. Re-birth into hope, into a right relationship with God at the centre of your life – as the lens through which you see everything else. And what John was doing was remarkably similar to what was done to those who wanted to convert to the Jewish faith – it's called a proselytes baptism – a ritual cleansing and leaving off of the old life to embrace the new. But he was baptizing those who were already Jews – into something new.

No wonder the professional religious folks were concerned about this guy.

The practice of baptism for the Christian community would very early on become not just a rite for repentance - but even more crucially, a rite for changing the believer's identity into a member of the family of followers of the way of Jesus Christ and so it remains today – no matter how much we try to make it into a rite of passage – that remains its meaning.

And this is pretty radical stuff. It's the kind of stuff that gets you into trouble with those who have a rather large investment in the status quo. And of course we know that things didn't end well for John the Baptizer – he paid for his devotion to the truth with his life. We might wish for our own sake – to make it easier on us who read of him and try to find ourselves in his story - that John had employed a little more “truthiness” – that wonderful contemporary weasel word for evasion. But that wasn't his MO. And in the service of God, of Jesus, if John had backed off the truth, and saved his own skin, he'd have forfeited the Gospel. He'd have backed away from the logical conclusion of all his preaching and exhortation. But he didn't.

Such are the difficulties of the story of John the Baptist – and yet, his is an integral part of the Jesus' story, of the breadth and depth of salvation history and of the history of the church.

His role as the one who goes before to prepare, as a prophet, as judge and as persecuted, all point to a man who counted all these things as “worth it” for the sake of the coming Kingdom. He was utterly, utterly convinced that Jesus was the answer - the Messiah had come to save. He was utterly convinced that his life was worth the service to that Messiah and that kingdom.

And here's the thing – you knew there was a thing – there's always a thing with the Gospel: as one scholar pointed out, the beginning of Mark's Gospel goes like this: “the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, . . . “ St. Mark knows that it's just the beginning and that the story goes on from his strange, terse telling of Jesus' arrival in human history. And that it will continue to be told and will unfold. That's where we come in because we share in John's ministry.

Because clearly, we are all called to the same work. We who know how the story continues – how still Jesus the Christ is still among us, still changing our lives and the lives of all who meet him and follow him in spirit and in truth. We know the ways in which the Holy Spirit of God is breathing the winds of change to bring to birth the hope of new life.

John's mantle has been passed on – for two millennia now – from generation to generation. We are now the heralds of the Christ. Just as John was born to be the forerunner, to prepare the people, so are we to proclaim the coming of Jesus; the fact that the kingdom of God has come near US in the person of Jesus the Christ. That as we travel through this season of Advent – it truly is a season of preparing and waiting to receive Jesus.

And maybe this year – in all its strangeness and quietness where there has been busyness and noise – maybe this year, we have time to consider this a bit more and to speak just a little more boldly, just a little more lovingly of the one who sustains us in these hard pandemic times.

Because We were born for the remembering of his birth, life, death, and Resurrection. We were born to announce that he lives and gives new birth and life to all the nations.

We were born to prepare people for Jesus.

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.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.