**Weekend of Sunday, December 10, 2023**

**2nd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Second Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-15a**

**Gospel Reading: Mark 1:1-8**

**Sermon Title: *“What Will Your Defense Be?”***

**Theme**

*John calls people to repent, to clear the decks, to completely reorder their lives so that nothing gets in the way of the Lord’s coming. The reading from Isaiah gives the context for this radical call: the assurance of forgiveness that encourages us to repent; the promise that the coming one will be gentle with the little ones. Isaiah calls us all to be heralds with John, to lift up our voices fearlessly and say, “See, your God is coming!” We say it to one another in worship, in order to say it with our lives in a world in need of justice and peace.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11**

 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.”

 6A voice says, “Cry out!”
  And I said, “What shall I cry?”
 All people are grass,
  their constancy is like the flower of the field.
 7The grass withers, the flower fades,
  when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
  surely the people are grass.
 8The grass withers, the flower fades;
  but the word of our God will stand forever.
 9Get you up to a high mountain,
  O Zion, herald of good tidings;
 lift up your voice with strength,
  O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
  lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
  “Here is your God!”
 10See, the Lord God comes with might,
  and his arm rules for him;
 his reward is with him,
  and his recompense before him.
 11He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
  he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them in his bosom,
  and gently lead the mother sheep.

**Second Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-15a**

8Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.
 11Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

 14Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15aand regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

**Gospel: Mark 1:1-8**

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.”

**Sermon**

This week I am focusing my sermon on the Second Reading from Second Peter. You remember Peter, impulsive Peter, one of the three along with James and John who formed Jesus’ inner circle. The same one who had the uncanny knack for saying and doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Well, this is the same guy. But if you take the time to read First or Second Peter then you will notice, that he’s *all growed up* by the time of this writing. Those impetuosities that he was known for that made him so relatable to us (who can’t relate to Paul?) have gone the way of youthful immaturity. Peter, the author of these two great pastoral letters was, by the time of these writings, old and wise. The Roman Catholic Church considers him the first leader of the church, the first pope. His story in itself ought to inspire us. From raw material, infused with the Holy Spirit, came a great spiritual leader.

The Second Letter of Peter was probably written near the end of his life, around the year, 65 AD. Remember that AD does not mean “After Death” but is a Latin phrase, “anno domini” meaning, "in the year of our Lord." I like to think of it like this, BC means before Christ was born, and AD therefore means after the time Christ was born. So if the year is 65 AD, and Peter was a contemporary of Jesus, he was about 65 when he wrote this letter, a very old age to reach in that period of human history.

Peter identified himself as the author in this letter and even told his readers that he was an eye-witness to the Transfiguration (1:16-18). Of course, the gospels tell so many great stories that include Peter. But the unique thing about First and Second Peter is that Peter, the author, is a first-hand eye-witness to Jesus Christ! These are not stories written by someone else that included Peter as the Gospels and Acts do. No, Peter walked alongside Jesus, heard his teaching and preaching, and witnessed his signs and miracles, and this letter is from the man himself. Paul couldn’t have said that!

And while I have mentioned Paul, let me remind you that Paul before his conversion, as Saul was a persecutor of the church. It was through Peter that the Holy Spirit convinced the early church leaders that the Gospel should be extended to the Gentiles. So after his conversion, Paul had some convincing to do with the original apostles that he was the real deal. But he won them over. Peter refers to Paul as “our dear brother” a little later in this letter. Peter had come a long way, hadn’t he?

As the acknowledged leader of the fledgling Christian church, Peter’s letters were not as location-specific as Paul’s were. There is some indication, especially in First Peter, that his letters were sent to several churches at the same time, as general pastoral teaching letters. Primary issues in Second Peter are:

1) to stimulate Christian growth (ch. 1),

2) to combat false teachings (ch. 2),

3) to encourage watchfulness given the Lord’s certain return (ch. 3).

Having set up the context for the letter, we are going to spend the rest of this sermon time in chapter three.

I find this interesting: Here we are in the year 2023 celebrating another Advent and there is nothing to indicate that the Lord will return any time soon. Some of us are frustrated by that. We take the Lord at his word when he tells us in scripture how wonderful the *life to come* will be, and so during Advent, we sing with hopeful anticipation and genuine sincerity, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” In this letter, written only a generation after the Resurrection, Peter was already trying to address the frustration that some in the church were feeling because the Lord had not yet returned. They have waited for over thirty years! Don’t we feel sorry for them?

Peter reminded his readers that

8with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

Peter’s illustration was not intended to be taken literally, but as an illustration, even if we lived 100 years, our lifetime would be less than 2 1/2 hours to the Lord. So Peter was simply saying relax, human time is not even close to the same thing as God's time.

But that is no comfort when one is living as a poor and hungry peasant in an occupied land. Allow me to offer another illustration that is a little closer to home. In our American context, the gospel appealed to slaves of pre-Civil War America, because through the promise of the gospel, they saw the hope of a better day in the *life to come*! Many of the great African spirituals we love to sing were born out of the labor pains of hard physical work, beatings, and unspeakable cruelty. Do you think they found comfort in the gospel?

The same was true of Peter’s church. It was not a prosperous time and though they didn’t know it, the persecution of Christians to come was going to make things worse before it got better. Peter himself would end up being martyred, crucified upside down on a cross according to church tradition, having never witnessed the Lord’s promised return.

9The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

But in verse 9, Peter also defended the Lord’s “slowness” as a benefit to humanity, for every moment that passes that the Lord does not return is another moment the unsaved might have to turn to the Lord. In other words, as the kids used to say, “It’s all good!” The Lord’s delay is a manifestation of the grace of God, for as Peter wrote; the Lord is “patient, with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” This is good news for those of you who worry about the spiritual well-being of friends and relatives.

But the most interesting part of this reading for me is verses 11 & 12:

11b …what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God …?

There are two words, verbs, in verse 12 that are way more packed with meaning than we first might think. Specifically, I am speaking of the phrase in verse 12; “waiting for and hastening.”

(:12) prosdokow) *waiting for*

This word *prosdokow* describes the direction of one’s mind. Expectancy, whether hope or fear is the mood about “the day of God,” to use Peter’s words. This word implies active anticipation – like I spoke of in last week’s sermon.

(:12) (spendo) *hastening*

*Hastening* seems like an old-fashioned word to me. It’s not a word I use in my vocabulary, but I like it. I probably would have used the words *anxious about*, but anxious can have a negative connotation. Anxiousness includes a sense of foreboding, uneasiness. And that is not at all what Peter was trying to transmit. The word *spendo* means *to desire with earnestness*.

And when we remember that what Peter was referring to was the “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,” well I wonder how many Christians in the year 2023 really believe and look forward to the Day of the Lord’s return with expectancy and hope and anticipation, and without anxiety, and desiring it earnestly? I wonder how many of us here today *really* believe the day is still coming. Or do we, in our American context in the year 2023 think, we’ve got it pretty good? The Day of the Lord can wait.

Or maybe you aren’t so sure about your relationship with the Lord and so you are fearful and anxious. Uneasy would be a gross understatement. But let me take you back to the beginning of this passage. The Lord desires that not one would perish. That includes you and me.

And finally, I want to mention the point Peter makes which I have borrowed as the title of this sermon. “What will your defense be?”

14“…be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish”

The answer to my title question, exhorts Peter, is to be found by the Lord, at peace, and without spot or blemish. Without spot or blemish? That sounds like an impossible task! And it is, except that once again I need to remind you of the love and grace of the God we worship revealed in Jesus Christ. God sent him, his own Son, into this spotted and blemished world to forgive us. We have been forgiven! That is our defense! And we can find peace in knowing that and making it part of who we are as children of the light.

The OT reading for today comes from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. In it, the prophet says:

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

Does that sound like a God who wants His people to be found at peace? I think so.

One final story might help to make this point. A story is told about a doctor who made a house call on a dying man. The man asked the doctor what death would be like. The doctor fumbled for a reply and then he heard his dog scratching at the door of the man's room. The answer then came to him. "Did you hear that noise?" he asked the patient. "That's my dog. I brought him with me tonight, and I left him downstairs before I came up to your room. He climbed those stairs because he knows I'm in here. He has no other ideas about what is in this room because he's never been here. All he knows is that I am in here and that is good enough for him." The doctor then looked back at the patient. "You don't know what is on the other side of the door of death, but you do know that your Master is there."

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Short of the cross, we have no defense. But at the foot of the cross, we find the love and grace of God revealed in a Savior, born in a barn, died on a cross, but won our defense. I encourage you to be found by your Master at peace, knowing that you have been forgiven, and will be found without spot or blemish, for He Himself has removed them. For those who call Him Savior and Lord, there is no need to fear what comes next, for our Lord, our sure defense, awaits us there.

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, we are so blessed. Perhaps so blessed that we can’t begin to imagine how wonderful the eternal life that you have planned for us must be. On the day of your return, be our sure defense. And give us the courage to invite others to come to know the love and grace you won for us on the cross. We pray this in your name. Amen