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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 6, 2020
2nd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary XX/Proper XX/Year B

First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Second Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:1-8

Sermon Title: “God Hears and Promises Mercy”

Theme

The Gospel of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus’ birth but with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.

Text

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

I told you a while back that there is a tradition in Lutheran preaching that teaches that the preacher should always present Law and Gospel in a sermon. I also told you that the preacher will often do that without making it obvious to you, the listener. Concerning this week's readings, it would be difficult to disguise.

In the First Reading, we hear a prophecy of the great Old Testament Prophet Isaiah, who said to all Israel, who had been in exile in Babylon, that their exile was about to end and the LORD himself was going to send them a savior. That savior did come in the unlikely person of King Cyrus of Persia. Yes, another foreign ruler, but one who dealt kindly with his subjects, one who not only allowed the Israelites to return to Judah and rebuild their cities but also rebuild their Temple and restore their ability to worship the LORD their God.

More than likely, when we hear those same sentinel words from Isaiah 40, we think of John the Baptizer, and sure enough, Mark ascribed those words to John the Baptizer, who was the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, a careful read will reveal that John never actually said those words, but throughout his ministry, he did in fact, exhort the Israelites, by then more accurately known as the Jews, in a similar way.

John was a strange cat. Mark wrote that he lived out in the wilderness on the fringes of community. Like many of the prophets of ancient Israel, John was eccentric. He wore clothes of camel hair, not the finely woven camel's hair that we prize today, no, it was more likely a camel skin or perhaps just the hair of a camel in a kind of rat's nest boa – if you've seen a camel at the zoo then this is easy to imagine. Mark mentioned the leather belt around his waist and his diet of locusts and wild honey. In doing so, Mark was aligning John with the great prophet Elijah, who also wore clothes of animal hair and abstained from meat and wine. That John was so eccentric and downright weird made him a spectacle, a person who got noticed, and I dare say, he demanded to be noticed, but not for himself, but for his mission.

John was never unclear about who he was or what his mission was. He came to prepare the way of the LORD. He knew his mission was to announce the coming of the LORD, the Messiah of God. For the people to be rightly prepared to welcome

him, he preached from the banks of the Jordan River and invited the people to receive a baptism of repentance, and because he was what we refer to as a "fire and brimstone" preacher he was quite convincing and brought many people to their knees asking for God's forgiveness. Having made their confession, John baptized them, but only for the forgiveness of their sins as a symbol of their getting ready for the one to come. And since all Judaism had been waiting for Messiah to come, that an odd character like John, in the tradition of Elijah came onto the scene made it all the more convincing, so come out they did.

So that is the law portion – in case you missed it, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of the LORD. And God is so holy that God cannot bear to even look at our sinfulness. So they, the ancient Israelites and later the ancient Jews, and God are at an impasse. No matter what method God gave them, (the Patriarchs, Moses, the Law, the Judges, the Kings, the Prophets), nothing worked. What to do?

Here comes the Gospel. God did the unthinkable. He sent his only son to earth in the form of the little baby Jesus whose birth we will celebrate in a couple of weeks. He will be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all people, of all times, and in all places, for those of the ancients, and ours, and for the generations to come, until he comes again as he promised.

This is where we find ourselves in the story of God and God's creation. Jesus was born in the Bethlehem barn and grew up to be the example of the godly life for us. We have his story captured in the Bible. We gather each week and hear God's word expounded upon, and yet, even for us, it's not enough. We are still sinners in need of a savior. In many ways, our modern world is no different. From my perspective in my lifetime, today there are fewer of us who claim to be Christian and far fewer of us who claim to be Christian who actually live out our lives of discipleship in the church, as Jesus taught.

It has been two thousand years since Christ died and rose again. It is easy for us to get complacent. One might say that it is unlikely that Christ will return soon. But another might say that his return is even more timely as time goes by. Jesus knows us so well, that 2000 years ago he told the parable that was last week's gospel reading that ending with him saying, "what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Here is the point of all this; throughout human history "God Hears and Promises Mercy." If you know your Biblical history then you know it's true. God hears us when we pray and even when we don't, and God always answers even when we aren't aware of it. This is the kind of God we worship, one revealed in the manger of Bethlehem and lifted up high on the Cross of Golgotha.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

This season of Advent I encourage you to examine your hearts and seek his forgiveness so that you are prepared for his return.

Prayer

God and Author of Law and Gospel, we thank you that you love us enough to give us words of warning and correction. Give us your Holy Spirit to incline us to heed your warnings and praise you for your grace. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our present and coming Lord. Amen