

FOUND BY GOD AT PEACE

Advent 2: The comforting face of God

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

This is Advent. The word means coming.

God has come.

God is come.

God will come.

Those are the great truths of the Christian faith.

And in Advent, we celebrate them.

God come. To be with us in Jesus Christ. Emmanuel.

But simply to declare those truths begs some questions.

This season of celebration is also known as

a season of spiritual searching.

When God comes to us, what does God *find*?

In what state does God find us?

In the scriptures on the second Sunday of Advent,

we always meet John the Baptist.

We heard the story told by Tara this morning.

The question of what God will find when he comes,

is exactly the question John was dealing with.

John was preparing the way for Jesus to come.

Jesus the anointed one, the Messiah, was about to be revealed.

John was getting the people ready.

Which was no small task.

Let's recall what John and his Jewish people

were dealing with in the Middle East 2000 years ago.

His Hebrew community of faith, the children of Abraham,

were losing sight of their peoplehood,

they were getting farther and farther from the covenant.

Which was quite understandable.

They were under extreme pressure.

The Empire of Rome was slowly and surely crushing their identity.

They were becoming more and more like the Romans and Greeks,

and most of the Hebrew people didn't notice, and didn't care.

There were some sub-groups that were strong, almost separatist.

Pharisees, Sadducees, Nazarites, Zealots.

They tried their best to strengthen and renew the Jewish identity.

To help the people remember who they were.

These groups used vastly different methods—

ritual purity, fasting, denial, violent rebellion.

They operated out of different convictions,

different assumptions about what God wanted for the Jews.

So there was a lot of conflict between them.

Meanwhile,

God's people were losing their communal moral grounding.

Now . . . think about that description of a people.

A faith community once close, cohesive, in covenant,

now fragmented, polarized,

under cultural and political pressure.

A faith community losing their peoplehood in a hostile culture.

A faith community losing touch with the core

of who God called them to be in this world,

because they have assimilated into it,

rather than engage it with their faith.

I could be describing 1st-century Palestinian Judaism.

Or I could be describing 21st-century American Christianity.

Seems like the social and spiritual state of affairs

in these two faith communities—

are more similar, than they are different.

So maybe John the Baptist's message is relevant to us, *too*.

Actually, John's message wasn't even original to *him*.

He was comparing *their* state of affairs,

with that of his people hundreds of years earlier.

John borrowed the text of his sermon directly from Isaiah,

the great prophet of Israel in the olden days.

When the Hebrew people were floundering in exile,

Isaiah was calling them back into covenant.

So here we have three vastly different cultures,

in vastly different eras,

over a period of 2,500 years,

to which the same sermon applies.
And it's fresh every time.

It goes like this,

“People of God, remember who you are.

Repent. Return to your God, to your covenant.

Return to your mission and identity as a people of God.

God is full of mercy. God will abundantly pardon.

God wants to move among you,

to form you as a people,

to partner with you, as a people,

to establish God's reign in the world,

to bring about what is right and just,

to restore what has been broken.

So repent, my people. Prepare the way for the Lord.”

That is Isaiah's message and John the Baptist's message—
a message to the lost people of God.

Repent, people. *Repent.*

But this is *not* the kind of repentance you might be thinking of.

This is not exactly the same as the repentance called for
by a revival preacher inviting us to walk the sawdust trail.

This is not you and me individually, feeling sorry,

being emotionally convicted of my personal sin.

That *might happen* in the process.

I very well *might* feel sorrow and regret

for particular ways I've been disobedient to the covenant.

But repentance is not the same as sorrow.

Repentance is not remorse.

Repentance is a change in our way of thinking.

The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*,

literally means, to “think again,”

to “change one's mind.”

Thinking rightly, is the first step toward living rightly.

It doesn't *guarantee* a change in behavior.

But faithful thought,

points us *toward* faithful living.

I'm not saying right thinking *saves* us.

No, right thinking *prepares* us for God's coming.

It prepares us for the Advent God wants to usher in.

It makes us ready for God's saving work.

That's why John the Baptist was very modest in his claims.

He preached repentance, and he baptized.

But he didn't tell the people coming out of the water,

“Okay, now you're saved.”

He said, “Okay, now you're ready for God to come to save you.”

He said, “I'm just the messenger.

One is about to come who will do the saving,
the Messiah.

Don't look to me. Look to him.

I'm not even worthy to stoop down and untie his shoes.”

Furthermore, this call to repentance

was a call to the whole community.

People were individually being invited to respond, yes,

but the question they responded to was,

Do you want to identify yourself

with this new thing God wants to do with his people?

Are you ready to join this repenting community

who are going think differently about who they are,

and about what God is up to in this world?

Communal repentance was the essential step of preparation.

A change in thinking was exactly what the people needed
to get them ready.

So if John the Baptist's message applies to

the lost people of God today,

what would it look like for the church of Jesus Christ, in *this* place,

to have communal repentance,

a collective change in our thinking?

It's a big question. But it's worth wrestling with.

And we don't wrestle with it often enough as a church.

Critical thinking takes a lot of work, and time, and energy.

Much easier to go with the flow, with what seems to work.

If what we're doing here in church
looks good, feels good, sounds good,
it must *be* good.

The trouble with that line of thinking is,
our thoughts and values are so deeply formed
by the culture around us,
that what looks good to our culture looks good to us.
And we end up with a bunch of "successful churches"
that are mirror images of the culture around them . . .
where big is better than small,
where popular is better than unpopular,
where now is better than later,
where security is better than risk,
where individual happiness and personal fulfillment
is the ultimate goal.

Trouble with that line of thinking is,
we end up with a kind of church and a kind of Christianity
that is just one more product to market, to advertize,
and to sell to individual consumers.
God and religion are just one more path
to a better life, a happier and more secure life.
So the "good life" is our end, and God is our means.

Brothers and sisters,
whenever anyone makes the God of all creation
into the means for achieving something they want,
they have just committed the sin of idolatry.
Idolatry is something we religious people are very good at.

That's what was getting John the Baptist all riled up.
His people had lost themselves.
They had become good citizens of the Roman Empire,
but they had stopped depending on the God who walked with them
out of physical and social and spiritual slavery.
They were opting for the safe path.
They chose not to risk the wrath of the Emperor,
by openly declaring their undivided loyalty to Yahweh,
the God of Abraham.

John was inviting them to repent,
to think differently about themselves,
to think differently about their God.

That's the only thing that would prepare them adequately,
for what God was about to do among them,
in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

We really *are* in the same boat today. *Most* of us.
We play it safe.
We put our security where our culture puts its security.
In the strength of the dollar.
In the rise of the stock market.
In the ability to buy all the stuff we want,
and protect ourselves from those who would take it from us.

But a collective, communal repentance of God's people today
would completely reorient us as a church.
We would stop thinking of church as
just another group to belong to,
or activity to attend,
or charitable cause to support,
or spiritual product to consume.
Being an active part of the people of God
participating in the mission of God in the world
would be *the*—I said *THE*—orienting reality of life.
It would form our values and shape our thinking.

So when we face threatening circumstances
such as the world faces today—
economically, socially, militarily, environmentally,
our instinctive response would not be to hunker down in fear,
or to slip into our protective shell,
and hold on to what we have for dear life.
No, reoriented people of God ask people-of-God type questions.
They look for signs of God's reign
even in the midst of a desolate wilderness.
And they live in genuine hope.
And deep trust.

And peace.
And comfort.
They live in a spirit of readiness for God's salvation.

Our hope and comfort and peace come
from the voices we choose to listen to.
A repentant, reoriented people of God
will hear the voice of God in the desert,
saying, "the valleys will be lifted up,
the rough places made level,
and the glory of the Lord will be revealed."

They don't consider it folly,
when in the middle of a long exile,
they hear a welcome word, like Isaiah's
"Here is your God!
He 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."

They don't read Psalm 85 as wishful thinking . . .
"For God the Lord will speak peace to his people . . .
Surely his salvation is at hand . . .
Steadfast love and faithfulness *will* meet;
righteousness and peace *will* kiss each other."

They take it as genuine encouragement,
not religious mumbo-jumbo,
when they read the apostle's words in 2 Peter,
"The Lord is not slow about his promise . . .
Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things,
strive to be *found by God at peace.*"
God is coming.
Strive to be found by God at peace.

When God's people repent together,
when they turn in their thinking and their living,
and reorient themselves around the hopeful truth
that God has come, God is come, and God will come in Jesus Christ,

it changes everything.
It brings deep hope and trust.
It brings a centeredness to life.
It brings peace.

It makes them ready for the present and future Advent of God in Christ.
I think this is at the heart of what we at Park View Mennonite
are trying to do,
as we begin a process of re-examining our vision,
and our priorities as a congregation.
It will be an opportunity for communal repentance,
for a collective change in our thinking about ourselves,
and about what God is up to in the world.
It will put us in a position for God's Advent among us.
It will make us ready for God's saving work.
It won't *save* us, anymore than good works saves *anyone*.
God saves. And repentance gets us ready.

So whenever and however God comes,
we will be found at peace.
We will, like the hymn writer put it,
have our hope built on nothing less than Jesus.
"When Christ shall come with trumpet sound,
oh, may we then in him be found,
dressed in his righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before the throne."

—Philip L. Kniss, December 7, 2008