

Potholes

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Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8

Advent II

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Any of us who want to travel to that manger in Bethlehem this Advent season ... must first pass through this Judean wilderness of Mark's Gospel ... where we will have an encounter with a locust-eating ... repent shouting ... John the Baptizer. This morning he has two themes: First ... that the Messiah is at the door ... and second ... that it is our repentance – our turning and living in a different way – that is essential if we hope to receive him.

The Baptizer gives us hope this morning ... along with a very specific requirement for entering into that hope.

This text we heard Marty read ... is where the author of Mark's Gospel begins his story of Jesus. In this Gospel there is no birth narrative ... no angels or shepherds ... no wise men or wicked kings. What we get from Mark is the Baptizer ... shouting repentance to the crowds who have come out to the wilderness to see him ... just the Baptizer ... quoting the prophet Isaiah ... just the Baptizer ... who seems to think the beginning of the Good News of Jesus can be explained by this passage from the Hebrew Bible: "Prepare the way of the Lord ... make his paths straight" ... or as Isaiah actually says it, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

This vision that Isaiah sets before us – this vision that the Baptizer borrows – envisions a world that is changing. The low places will be built up ... the high places will be brought down ... the rough and uneven places will be made level ... today we might say ... the potholes will be fixed.

Last week ... our texts were full of lament and longing ... while today's texts say the misery and destitution are coming to an end ... that there will be a new relationship with this God who is poetically described by Isaiah as having the strength of a warrior ... and the gentleness of a shepherd.

This week's texts are full of the Good News of God's presence ... of God's faithfulness. There is comfort and redemption for the waiting believers and change is on the way. But that change ... my friends ... once again ... depends on us.

Now I know we don't particularly like this word repentance ... especially we don't like the Baptizer shouting it out this close to Christmas. And it is true that for far too long it has been used by the church to shame folks ... to make people feel bad about themselves.

So often when we hear that word ... repent ... we begin to look at ourselves as "awful wily sinners" as the 15th century reformer John Calvin was so fond of saying. We think of the mean things we have done ... or the people we have hurt ... or the little lies we have told ... perhaps we even have a childhood image seared into our imaginations ... of that place we will end up ... if we fail to repent.

But today ... I want us to think of repentance in a different way ... in a way described like this: “Repentance is a dynamic condition ... a continuous progress towards God. Properly speaking ... it is the pursuit of the living God.”

That definition comes to us from a contemporary leader of the Orthodox Church ... and it encourages us to see repentance in a much broader way ... to see it as a lifelong effort ... as a journey ... really as a spiritual practice ... that will take us closer and closer to God.

It takes the idea of repentance as turning our lives in a new direction ... an idea we have talked about here many times ... and broadens it into an ongoing process. In other words ... we repent and we turn our lives more towards the way of God ... and because we have done that ... we gain a new insight ... and so we turn our lives more towards the way of God ... and again that turning makes us even more aware of the world God wants ... and so the cycle continues ... until we live a life of turning ... until we live a life of repentance.

And when we think of repentance in this way ... it rids us of the notion of petty rules and ancient dogma ... and being ashamed ... rather ... it focuses our minds on a growing relationship with the Holy.

And so the question we might want to ask on this second Sunday of Advent is this: What is it in your life ... in my life ... that gets in the way of that continuous progress towards God? What is it in your life ... in my life ... that gets in the way of our pursuit of the God that is also pursuing us?

What are the mountains and the valleys in our lives ... what are the potholes ... that make the road home so bumpy for us?

As I said last week ... both the people Isaiah was writing for and the people Mark’s gospel was written for ... were people who were in exile. The Hebrew people had been exiled in Babylon and had now returned to a destroyed Jerusalem. Some 300-400 years later ... the Jews of Mark’s day had just seen their Temple destroyed and their rebellion violently crushed by Rome. Their lives, too, were in chaos. Both groups of people were awaiting a word from God ... longing for a word from God.

So perhaps the first thing we have to do if we are going to live a life of repentance ... is to become aware of the reality that we ... like those ancients before us ... also live in exile and chaos. We have to be fully aware of how far from home we still are. And ... we need to remember ... that some of those ancient Hebrew people chose to remain in Babylon even after they were allowed to return home ... there were people who had adapted to that foreign culture.

And sometimes it feels like we have pretty much adapted to life in our own Babylon as well. We’ve adapted to a world of have and have nots ... to a world where lies are presented as truth and truth is presented as “fake news” ... to a world where even the slaughter of first graders didn’t budge our leaders into passing sweeping gun laws.

Babylon has worked out pretty well for some of us ... we’ve adapted ... we’ve forgotten about home ... forgotten about the ways of God.

As the Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann says ... we have developed a desire only for a private shalom ... and we say ... I'm doing pretty well ... Babylon isn't so bad. So we need to ask ourselves: "Do we really want to hear the voice of these prophets this morning?"

Are we ready for this change they are talking about?

Are we ready for a world of peace and love and justice?

Are we ready to abandon the weapons of war?

Are we ready to share the fruits of the earth?

Are we ready to recognize all men and women as our brothers and sisters?

Are we ready to forgive our enemies?

Are we ready to love our neighbors?

It seems the answer is far from certain ... so that might be the first pothole we need to fix ... and that is to become aware of where we are complicit in all that is wrong with our world.

The message of these texts ... the message of this season ... is good news only for people who recognize that they are themselves exiles and far from home. For Jesus to truly be our redeemer ... we must be aware that we need to be saved.

If indeed we find ourselves longing for that different world ... if we are out there doing peacebuilding and justice work ... then there is another pothole that might develop on the road to home ... and that is what we call "burn out" ... which can cause us to run headlong into apathy and indifference ... because we have failed to strengthen our resilience muscles.

So many of you understand that there is earth-moving work that has to be done ... there are those mountains that need to be brought down and those valleys that need to be built up ... and many of you are doing it ... and have done it ... and will continue to do that work.

But sometimes, if you are like me, you get very discouraged ... and there are times when you are ready to give up because it seems like the best you can do is merely a drop in the proverbial bucket.

We have waited so long and nothing seems to be getting better ... and we all know that we are in a particularly tough stretch right now. But as one pastor said recently ... "This is not our first winter and it will not be our last. It is arrogant and disrespectful of the resilient teachers that have come before us to think otherwise."

In a publication called Timeline ... a young man writes about why he works for social change ... and his story might also speak to us this morning. He tells the Greek myth about Sisyphus ... who was doomed for eternity to roll a massive boulder up a hill ... only to have it roll back down just before reaching the top. This young man said he often feels like that as well ... as he works to make the world a better place ... he felt like he, too, was pushing a boulder up a hill ... until that day when he

decided that this story of Sisyphus only becomes a tragedy if we don't like pushing the boulder ... or ... if we only pay attention to the summit.

The boulder in this world must be pushed ... but sometimes we allow ourselves to stop seeing the need – we turn the other way – because we are weary, he writes, but what if we ask a friend to help ... or take a different route each time ... of what if we sing while we work ... what if we remember that we can get stronger in the process?

So let's pause in all our preparations for Christmas and be reminded that God is still with us ... working through us ... continuing the story of the good news among and in and with us ... and will keep at it well after this season is over.

This story is bigger than the news stories we hear or the worries we harbor ... or even the hopes we share. Our God is not done.

There is one last pothole I want to mention this morning ... that can get in the way of our road home ... and that is our nostalgia ... our longing for a past that may or may not have been better than our present and our future.

The Quaker Pastor Philip Gulley recently referred to nostalgia as like being encased in amber ... like a specimen kept under glass. Gulley talks of his own battle with nostalgia ... especially this past Thanksgiving which was the first following the death of his mother ... which ... he says ... put his whole family in a funk. He says he began the day by driving into town past his childhood home ... sitting out front ... remembering when his dad would cook the turkey on the Weber grill out in the barn and his Mom conducted her symphony of baking in the kitchen.

But then Gulley said he realized that this obsession with the past could jeopardize his future ... because it would prevent him from reaching toward the new ... because nostalgia forces us to forget our duty to the future ... which Gulley says is our greatest requirement as human beings.

So I don't know about you ... but there have been times when I've needed to sit in a car in front of my grandma's house and cry for what is no more ... perhaps you have too ... but we can't stay there ... because Gulley is right ... our duty is to God's future.

Advent asks us to be willing to stand in a place of change ... and to stand in that place is to understand that we are not prisoners of our past or even our present. Rather a life of turning more and more towards God is possible for each of us ... the potholes can be filled in ... the road home can be made smooth and straight.

At base ... that's what Advent asks us to do. Amen.