

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Prepare The Way

“Prepare The Way of the Lord, make straight the path” cry out our prophets.

The prophets expect great things from God and because of that they expect great things from us. Isaiah 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.” (Isaiah 4:3-5)

John cries out ““Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,””

...I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:2,8)

In the gospel of Mark John the baptist portrays the prophet Elijah, the one who will signal the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah asks us to recognize God with us. The scripture says “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!”” That is what we are called to as people of faith. If there is anything for us to rediscover in this advent season it is this: “Here is our God” We are called to open our eyes and see The Holy, we are called to light the way so that others see God too. That’s it.

Advent is all about promises. And not just Advent, of course, but the whole Gospel. “Mark literally begins his account with a promise of Isaiah. It’s the promise of Isaiah to desperate Israel at one of the low points of its history. And while Mark clearly invites us to see John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise that one will come crying out in the wilderness, it’s the whole of Isaiah’s promise of comfort, deliverance, and renewal that Mark is claiming happens in the ministry of the one John heralds.”¹

These scriptures are ancient and in our world today they might even feel irrelevant. What do they mean? How do we see God in our world in this season of life? How do we hear the calls of these prophets? Fulfillment and expectation are powerful and prophetic but it is not just about what the prophet says. It’s what the prophet does, and what the prophets call us too.

¹ Lose, David <http://www.davidlose.net>

As I am preaching this advent season I am carrying thoughts, images and heartaches for Israel and Palestine, for Ferguson, for our world and for young people closer to home dealing with depression and suicide. Things have been taking place recently in humanity that I can not fathom, and so I wonder, what does that mean for us? How do we hear the words of these prophets? Many in society see these events and blame God, or discount any possibility of a Holy Anything. So I want us to stop and pause. I want us to hear the Christmas story this year as it began. A story of light being born into a dark and desperate world.

Prophets are truth-tellers, “they are not fortune-tellers, not forecasters of the future, not doomsday prognosticators. They are only predictors of what is to come if that future makes sense because of or due to present behavior. They are analyzers of the “now” for the sake of moving toward a different future.

Truth-tellers are essential, but not very popular.”²

Floria Steinem once said “The truth will set you free, but first it will really ~~piss-you-off~~ tick you off (that’s the edited language). Often discovering the truth or being told the truth is an exercise in looking into a mirror. We are forced to see what we’d rather not see. Highlighted are those things we have chosen to disregard, or pretend we are not.

Karoline Lewis wrote “And when the truth is suppressed? Ferguson happens when the truth is suppressed. So does crucifixion.”³

It seems to me if this story is to truly change our lives Advent needs to be about truth-telling. “Otherwise, Advent, even Christmas, will be sentimentalized, simply the frenzied weeks before Christmas that lead to a saccharine story about shepherds and sheep and an adorable baby in a manger. But we all know the truth about cute little babies. They are hard work. And to be human means really hard stuff.”

The truth of the incarnation is that God committed God’s self to everything it means to be human. This is not just a fluffy story about a babe in a manger we are preparing for this is God coming in to bring joy, and fulfill a desperate need for comfort, to bring forth the radical presence of peace and promise abundant life and more. That is what the prophets are telling us. God and the prophets hold great expectations for this Messiah. I hold great expectations for the presence of light in this dark world. Advent is about waiting for the fulfilment of a promise.

David Lose reminds us promises “create an expectation about the future and set something in motion. When I promise my kids we’ll play a board game after the chores are done on the weekend, inevitably the pieces are set out. When you promise to call someone after a date, that person typically anticipates the call. And when a friend promises you a ride home after the game, you don’t make other arrangements – why should you; you’ve got a promise... Promises create

² Lewis, Karoline www.workingpreacher.org

³ IBID

an expectation about the future and that future expectation sets something in motion right here and right now in the present.

The same is true about God's promise. Truth be told, even more so. And that, perhaps, is the key message of Advent. That in the stable at Bethlehem God is not only keeping promises God made to Israel but also making promises to us. That in Jesus, God hears our cries of fear and concern and doubt at our lowest points and responds... And, my goodness, but the headlines seem full of low points. Whether about the spread of Ebola, unrest in the Middle East, delayed – or perhaps deferred – justice in Ferguson. And to these cries for deliverance, God responds with promises of healing, peace, and justice in and through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I know, I know, we've heard that kind of promise before, and at times it may feel like just oh, so much more pie in the sky. But consider this: What if God's promises are not all eschatological, something we wait patiently for until the end of time? Or, maybe more accurately, what if we are invited to participate here and now in the eschatological promises of God by contributing to them in the present? What if, that is, part of how God keeps God's promises is through our efforts to heal, comfort, help, and bring justice?"⁴

Jesus comes to take on the powers that perpetuate evil, sin, injustice, darkness. "He comes to take them on by telling the truth and being the truth -- the truth that names our own compliance, our own conformity, our own acquiescence to the kind of sin that tolerates inequity, that believes we have "gotten past" the -isms that exclude and excuse, that insists on the protection of institutional ideologies thereby rationalizing acts of dehumanization.

The beginning of the good news happens in the middle of nowhere (Mark 1:3) and not in the center of power. The good news of truth and justice for all will be cried out by the prophets willing to accept all. The truth will be known in the outskirts, in the unexpected places, the spaces where boundaries have been crossed and that needed to be torn down long, long ago."⁵

In our Advent study "Throw open the heaven's" on Tuesday night we recalled how God usually "comes in the back door" in an unexpected way. We expect God to come in the way we want God to come and God will not. God will show up in the places and voices of the immigrants, the underdogs, the ones we see as unworthy. "It seems that the truth, if we are willing to listen, will not be shouted from the halls of so-called justice but from a town of 21,111 in Missouri."⁶ The truth will be spoken in the streets of Calcutta, in the tent cities of the homeless, in the McDonald's parking lot, and the beggar on the corner of Cleveland and Hwy 99.

This season is about us participating in the story of Immanuel God with us. It is about us admit the hard truth of our communal, national and global sins. It is the opportunity to open our eyes to the injustices and darkness of the world and expect great things of our faith that brings hope, peace, joy, love and light into this world. And acknowledge that we are a part of this injustice

⁴ Lose

⁵ IBID

⁶ IBID

and be transformed by the holy presence in such a way that we too will bring hope, peace, joy, love and light into this despairing world.

We need to do more than listen to the words of the prophets as ancient stories and tales. We too are called to “Prepare the Way of the Lord” that others may see hope, peace, and light in this difficult season. It’s a hard story but its a beautiful promise. Jesus promises for the sake of the world God loves, that God’s love will be told for all.

So I ask again as I’ve asked before “What kind of waiting will you do this Advent?” We can sit around and wait for Christmas, or for the coming of Emmanuel or we can participate in the coming of light and hope in our world right now. “God is continuing the story of the good news of Jesus in and through our words and actions and each of us will have a hundred and one opportunities this very week to contribute to that sacred story, to make it come alive, to help God keep God’s promises here and now. No, what we do will not bring ultimate healing or comfort or peace or justice. That’s God’s job, and God will keep God’s promises to the fullest in the fullness of time. But we don’t have to wait for that passively but are invited to throw ourselves into that venture both trusting God’s promises and living them right here, right now.”

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with us.

Amen.