

Message for the second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Isaiah 40:1-5 and Mark 1:1-8

Getting ready

We're in the thick of it now, our preparations for Christmas. We're busy making plans for our holiday celebrations. Some of us will be hosting guests in our homes.

Others of us will be travelling to visit family and friends in other places. Some of us are planning menus. All of us are probably thinking about what gifts to buy for whom.

We're making our lists and checking them twice. We're getting ready for Christmas!

Of course that's what Advent is all about: Getting ready for Christmas. Getting ready for the baby Jesus. Getting ready for God to once again come to live among us. That's the theme of our scripture passages for today. In both Isaiah and Mark we hear the call, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" But neither the prophet Isaiah nor John the Baptist are referring to checking off Christmas lists, buying presents or putting up decorations. They are after something much bigger. Something life-changing, in fact. Something that will turn us around and set us straight. Something that will open us up to the transforming power of the living God, the one who is coming, the one who is already here.

For both Isaiah and John the Baptist, it starts with repentance, with confession of sins and a longing for forgiveness. Hmm... Do we really want to go there at Christmastime? Isn't Christmas supposed to be all sweetness and light? Yes, but the reality is that we only really get to what is truly sweetness and light if we come with hearts that are open and true, hearts that are honest and ready for change. The way we prepare ourselves for the coming of God among us is to clean house, metaphorically

speaking. We need to get rid of the clutter, the junk, the barriers that keep God at a distance. We have to remove the obstacles that are in God's path to us, our path to God.

Removing obstacles is the gist of our passage from Isaiah 40. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God," says the prophet. "Every 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." When this happens, when these obstacles – the high mountains, the low valleys, the rough roads – are removed, "*then* the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." *Then* all people shall see it together. The people of Israel have come humbly before God, confessing their sin, asking for forgiveness, longing for their relationship to be restored. Comfort them, God says. Speak tenderly to them. Tell them I forgive them. Let them be held back by obstacles no more.

In the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, according to Mark, we hear the same cry from John the baptizer: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' Remove the obstacles that block the way. John calls the people of Jerusalem and the Judean countryside to repentance. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming," he says. Get ready to meet him. Take stock of your lives, confess your sins, open your hearts. Get ready, for great and wonderful change is at hand. Come, he says to them, and to us, and I will help you get rid of the obstacles. I will baptize you with water for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will be ready to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

On this second Sunday of Advent as we anticipate the coming, once again, of God With Us, let's think about the obstacles in our own lives, obstacles that make it difficult for us to access God's healing and transforming power. Ask yourself, what is it in my life that acts as a barrier? What in my life are the rough roads, the high mountains, the

deep valleys that make connection with God and others difficult, if not impossible? What are the sins that I need to confess? Take a minute to think about this.

Minute of silence

Now lift these things up to God. Confess them. Put them out there on the table just as they are, these obstacles, these things that have kept God and other people at a distance. Ask for God's help in letting them go, in overcoming them. Ask for God's forgiveness.

A period of silence

Now, just as the crowds came to John for the baptism of forgiveness as they prepared their hearts and their lives to receive Jesus, you, too, can receive an assurance that forgiveness is yours and that real connection with God this Christmas season is possible. I invite you to come forward now to receive your own baptism of forgiveness. You will be anointed with water so that you will be ready for the One who is coming, the One who is already here, to baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Words for anointing: Receive God's forgiveness

You have and will continue to receive God's forgiveness, sisters and brothers. It is a well that never runs dry, thanks be to God. But it is a well. You have to come to it to get the living water that you need. You have to intentionally stay connected to the God of life.

Getting rid of the obstacles that block our path to God, the fears that hold us captive, our tendency to think only of ourselves, is an ongoing process. But it's not something we do on our own. It is something in which God is already involved. Actually it starts with God. God reaches out to us. We join in this work of God's on our

own behalf. Which is another act of preparation: Daily intentionally putting ourselves in God's hands so that our wills can be conformed and conjoined with God's will and our hearts stay open to the comfort and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In the December issue of Purpose magazine there is an article by Tammy Darling entitled, "Perfect Peace." What she writes is a good illustration, I think, of the power of preparation.

It all starts with her fear of flying. Because of this fear Ms. Darling managed to avoid airplanes for most of her life. However, the time came when there was no choice. She knew she was going to have to get on an airplane.

"I spent a lot of time in prayer and in God's Word in the days and weeks before the trip," she writes. "And it was time well spent, for the more time I spent in the presence of God, the more peace I felt. By the time I boarded the plane for my first-ever flight, I had a measure of peace that I was confident would see me through."

At first things went smoothly and she relaxed. But then her worst fears were realized. Here's how she describes it:

"The takeoff and initial first hour were relatively smooth. And then we experienced turbulence. Serious turbulence. Instructed to fasten our seatbelts, I began to pray. I breathed a sigh of relief when the plane began to descend for the landing. The airplane touched down. Then, suddenly, it jerked back up again and started to ascend, shaking violently as it did. Passengers began to scream; not a word came from the pilot or crew.

"Above the sounds of screams, a woman nearby began to pray with authority, her voice rising above the screaming. Others joined her in prayer, as did I. And in that

moment, as I was praying, I had a startling realization: I was not afraid. In fact, I did not have a single butterfly. I didn't know if we would land safely or crash into the ocean, but I was at perfect peace.

“It was almost 25 minutes of rocky flying before the plane finally landed safely. As my feet stepped onto solid ground, a life-changing thought came to me: This is what the peace of God that passes all understanding feels like.” This experience of peace was made possible, Ms. Darling says, because her heart and mind were conformed and conjoined with God's. “In the days and weeks leading up to the flight, I remained close to the Lord,” she explains. “I walked onto the plane with complete confidence in God's goodness and faithfulness, knowing that I could trust God with my life.”

Sisters and brothers, in preparation for the coming, once again, of God With Us, we bring our whole selves to God, recognizing the obstacles with us, confessing our sins, expressing our desire for a deeper relationship with God, asking for and receiving forgiveness. In doing so, we are brought into right relationship with God, a relationship which is precious and life-giving and a relationship which requires loving attention. As the Advent season unfolds, keep preparing the way. Remain close to God. Spend time each day in reflection and prayer. If you do this – if along with the baking, the cleaning, the present buying you stay close to God – you will be truly ready for Christmas.

May you be prepared. May you walk into whatever may come with complete confidence in God's goodness and faithfulness, knowing that you can trust God with your lives.

Let it be so. Amen.