

**Pastor Jim Cords**  
**December 6, 2020**

The holy gospel for this second Sunday in Advent comes to us from the Gospel of Mark, the first chapter:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way”  
“a voice of one calling in the desert,  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that You would communicate Your love to us this day, that we would understand it in deeper and more powerful ways, that it would sustain us and give us life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

This second week of Advent, we focus on love, God's love expressed to us in Jesus for all people, to bring us back to Him, to restore us, and redeem us. There are probably as many definitions of love as there are people to express their thoughts, but today we want to hear how God expresses His love to us through the prophet Isaiah, through John Mark, in the Gospel of Mark, and through the apostle Peter. In all of it, I pray that all of us would understand the God's love is for us. The prophet Isaiah begins with these words in chapter 40:

Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed,  
that her sin has been paid for,

that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sin.

Beginning here in chapter 40, the prophet Isaiah begins to express God's words of comfort, His words of vindication for the people of Israel, and judgment for the enemies of God. Salvation would be accomplished through the arrival, suffering, and exaltation of the Lord Servant, the Messiah, Jesus. God comforts his people who are in exile by letting them know that their rescuer, their Messiah, is coming. It is a promise of a world-transforming glory. God will display His glory by coming to us in Jesus and it will change everything.

Jesus is God's fulfilling of the promise that He's made to His people from the beginning. God shows us His incomparable power, power that can, in fact, transform death into life, bondage into freedom, chaos into peace. We want to hear that in these words of the prophet. a promise of glorious Hope that breaks upon the people of God.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” is the voice of one who is calling out in the wilderness. “Make straight paths for Him.” But the question for us is how do our hearts get prepared for the abiding presence of Christ, who would seek to dwell in us, and live in our world through us. There is a dangerous word that the prophet takes seriously when God's glory comes. You see, God's glory takes on sin and evil. So the word of God's coming is not necessarily a word of good news for those who are enemies of God. In fact, these very words come also in Malachi chapter 3:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming says the Lord of hosts.

God will address the bondage of His people by coming to them, by showing up in their midst, to defend them, to free them, and yes, even to bring a word of destruction toward that which is evil, toward that which is an enemy of God, and an enemy, therefore, of His people. And so, the prophet Malachi continues with these words. “who can endure the day of His coming?” It is a word that warns us about the destruction of God. We cannot expect to receive Christ in His coming without preparing our hearts and our lives, without acknowledging the reality of our sin and brokenness, and the sin and brokenness of this world. Because of God's love for us, sin and evil will be destroyed. It is a refiner's fire. That can be a terrifying word.

I want us to remember the true nature of love. Love is not just a word of acceptance, a word of tolerance. It is a word that indeed transforms us. It is a love from God that wants the very best

for us and therefore, God will lift us up. God will provide us light for our path, a light that we are called to follow. And so, God's presence, God's coming as Messiah, as Anointed One, as King, is a coming to which we respond with submission, by recognizing who God is, by serving God as Lord of the world and of our very own lives.

Who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand as He is appearing? Those who are cleansed, those who are redeemed because, you see, as we're told in the Gospel of John, He does not come to condemn the world, but to bring it to life. He comes in love, but in that love, He will seek to destroy that which is evil. And so we are prepared for His coming through repentance, through recognizing His glory. His goodness shows that on our own, we are not good or glorious. So while it comes as a word of good news to us who know and see the truth of Jesus, it also comes as a word of condemnation toward sin and evil. That, too, I would argue is good news! It's good news that God in His coming doesn't overlook evil, but destroys it. He doesn't just simply say this is all fine. He seeks to set apart His people, those who He loves from those things that would hurt, from those things that would keep them in bondage. God wants to set us free. He wants us to begin to see the world as He desires and intends it to be, as He created it. So it is a time of redemption, the coming of the Lord. It's a time of making things right and that includes our hearts and our perspective, as well as our world. "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years" from Malachi chapter 3, verse 3.

And so let's ask this question as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus. Who is He? You see, that's the emphasis in the Gospel of Mark. He wants to show us, to show his readers who Jesus is, and for us to understand that Jesus comes as the Messiah, as the Christ, as the Anointed One, the King, the Son of God. Therefore, our response to this Jesus is to submit, is to worship, is to adore, is to receive Him to sit upon the throne of our hearts and of our lives. So suddenly we're asking ourselves the question not what do I want, not what do I need, but rather, we're asking ourselves what is it that God wants for this world and how is it that I can both receive that and be a part of its coming. Submission to God means to allow the Holy Spirit to create in us receptive hearts, so that we began to seek, to see as God sees.

Repentance is an interesting word in the Greek. It's the word, *metanoia* which, in literal terms, means to think again, to see things as God sees them, to reorient our worldview such that we look at the world and ourselves and others from the perspective of God, who created us. When we do that, we begin to see that we may have acted and responded toward those things wrongly, selfishly, from a warped perspective.

So we ask who is God, who is this Jesus, and how can seeing who God is help us to understand how we are to live within his creation, but not by our strength, and instead, by the transforming power of love, in the freedom that Christ came to bring to us, to offer to us, to work out in our hearts and lives through this Holy Spirit in whom we are baptized. He is King and we are servants and so we ask how can we live in the glory and goodness, in the love and transforming power and hope of Christ our Savior and Lord, of Jesus, the Anointed One who is king of the universe.

Now I don't know about you, but I've been a Christian for most of my life. I've certainly been the Christian in the whole entire year of 2020. Quite frankly, I haven't liked this year very much, in spite of the fact that I've been blessed upon blessed upon blessed throughout this year, amazing provision in my own life and yet also, fear and disappointment and discouragement, upon seeing the coronavirus and its effects and impacts, upon seeing the fires especially raging throughout our state here in California, upon seeing the impact in relationships, of the animosity that has happened in our politics and culture. It's been a difficult year and I want to say, in this Advent season, as I've been saying throughout, come, Lord Jesus. God, we need You to show up in our lives and in our world and in our relationships. Come and make things right and do it *now*!

So when we turn from this word of preparation that came in the words of John the Baptist, that came in the words of the prophet Isaiah, and we see how they're applied to the apostle Peter and we see these words of apparent patience. For in 2 Peter 3, it says, "do not forget this one thing, my friends, with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day." And interestingly enough, this wasn't just Peter's idea. Rather, Peter got it from Psalm 90, which says "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past or as a watch in the night." In other words, it's not going to happen according to my timing and my desires, but it's going to happen according to God's timing and His desires. So if Jesus comes as Lord, and if we seek His coming, what can we learn about this God we serve, this God who rescues us. What can we learn about what He wants and Peter tells us in verse 9 of chapter 3 "the Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." I've always thought of Advent as a time of anticipation and as a time of waiting. What I realized, as I've looked at this text, this epistle of 2 Peter, is that it may not be that we're waiting for God. It might very well be that God is waiting for us, that God is being patient, giving us time to prepare our hearts, giving us time to allow His transforming work of the Holy Spirit in and through us, to change other people's hearts, so that they, too, might be ready for His coming, that they, too, might receive His grace, that they, too, might repent, that is, recognize the truth of who God is and what God

values and adjust their worldview to the view of the Creator, to the view of the One who promised and sent His only son to set them free, to bring them forgiveness and new life, to bring them a hope that will not disappoint.

So many things I've hoped for in recent weeks have come to disappointment because they just haven't happened or they've been shut off or shut down by new restrictions or by new challenges and I realize that trusting in God means waiting for what God wants in us and through us and perhaps it means recognizing that there are opportunities right here and right now to make Christ known anew. The call to repentance is not a threat. The call to repentance is a promise. People who experienced the brokenness of guilt and shame need to hear afresh words of love and forgiveness and transformation. They need to know that God's promise and God's power is for them. Perhaps we can see in this word of the Lord from verse 13 of 2 Peter 3, "But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness." This transformation that we talk about, this transformation that I've often understood in my own life was something that was personal, that is, that God wanted to transform my heart and life through Jesus and His Holy Spirit which is absolutely true.

But now I see that God's design is not just for me. God's design is to transform this world, to transform the heavens and the Earth, to bring about a new reality in which God's goodness and righteousness and love rule over all. That means a completely new reality that is promised and is certainly not yet. So over the last several weeks, I've focused on this idea of the "meantime," what happens in the meantime, what is God actually at work doing. Well, in Peter we're told what He's doing is being patient, so that the work of the gospel through the work of God's people in His church can have an impact, can make the change, so that all might understand His love, His forgiveness, His grace, to set them free, to prepare their hearts to receive Him in a new way. Peter goes here in verse 14, "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with him." I've often read that and thought that, again, this was about me and Jesus, This is about I thought Jesus making me ready, so that when God comes I'm judged by Jesus as I'm covered in His blood, rather than by my own brokenness and faults and shortcomings, and thanks be to God, that's true, but there's more.

You see just as God sent John to prepare the way in the wilderness, he sends us. Our living lives in this goodness and love and grace and righteousness of God that covers us is a part of what God is doing in the world to transform the world. There are those who referred to this time as unprecedented and there are those who really hate that phrase. And yet we live in days that give us extraordinary opportunities because there are so many people who are experiencing discouragement and hopelessness. There are so many people in their isolation who feel alone

and isolated. Not only do they not feel loved by others in their isolation, but they don't feel loved by God either. We, as God's hands and feet and mouth, have an opportunity to live our lives in such a way that they enlighten the world, to the hope and love of God for them which can give them life and encouragement and hope and peace and joy, even right now in this COVID-19 Advent season. We are the light of the world, who bring the hope of the Gospel of Jesus, who comes to us in love, to bring us hope and peace and joy. But we don't do it by effort. We don't do it by strengthening our commitment, by striving harder to be kinder. We do it by recognizing in our own hearts and lives the depth of God's love for us and allowing that love to lift us up, to encourage us, and out of that goodness, out of that overflow, we share this amazing, transforming love with the people in our lives and in our world.

I was talking to a neighboring pastor earlier this week. He was talking about his emphasis in the coming Christmas services. He's using an illustration of the lights that come in these sticks. You break them and that allows the chemicals to come together. You shake them up and when you do that, they shine as lights. These light sticks may be a beautiful illustration of what God is doing in and through us right now. Our brokenness, our struggle is not in spite of God's love. It's, in reality, God's love at work creating opportunities for us to shine in our world. The world not only needs to see us, but we need to be seen and recognize the purpose and the power of God's love at work in and through us right now this very Advent love day. So go in peace. Go in love. Go in hope and joy to serve the world. Thanks be to God. Amen. And come, Lord Jesus