



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Waiting for the World to Change” Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8a-15a; Mark 1:1-8 The Lord’s Supper

It’s hard to know what part of the year we’re in, sometimes. From store decorations, you’d think we’ve been in a long, slow Christmas time since November First. To judge from the way President-Elect Obama is announcing Cabinet appointments, you might think it’s already mid-January. You’d think from the unusually warm weather of week ago and no rain, that is was September. It’s hard to know what weight of clothes to wear, to know when I should be sending Christmas gifts to distant relatives—rather disorienting. But that’s the way Christmas is, anyway. Christmas is God’s message of hope, coming in the coldest and darkest time of the year—and that’s “*SO* God!”

Today’s Bible texts for this Second Sunday in Advent likewise give a confusing picture of what time it is, and what is God saying. But then, I think there’s a solution to the confusion, too. Let’s dig in.

First, please find the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah. He’s one of the “biggies”, with his writings stretching over many years—from before the Fall of Jerusalem in 587 to the Exile in Babylon, and to the miraculous Return—a new Exodus, with acts of God all along the way. Find chapter 40 in Isaiah. Chapters 1-39 come from the early period of Isaiah, before Babylon overran Israel. That portion of Isaiah is God’s message of judgment because the people abandoned the God who had done so much for them. Babylon’s armies had marched in, destroyed Israel’s defenses, and carted back to Babylon “the best and brightest” of Israel’s culture. Sitting in Babylon for many years, under constant pressure from the dominant culture to conform, the captives pushed back with all they could muster. Without the Temple in Jerusalem serving as the centerpiece of their faith, the Israelites in Babylon started the decentralized synagogue system of faith and tradition schools. They told their foundation faith stories more vigorously, and worked hard to keep their community together, shunning defectors who went over to “the dark side”. Read the book of Daniel, and you get a good idea of the kinds of pressure the Exiles from Israel felt on a daily basis.

Then after chapters 1-39 of Isaiah, suddenly here comes what we call chapter 40. It’s message is SO different—a message of hope bursting from the prophet’s lips. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read Isaiah 40, verses 1-11. This is the New Revised Standard Version. *[text]*

Comfort is coming, says the Lord. The punishment is ended. This must have been an electric moment for those hearing Isaiah--so different, it might have been hard to believe after so many years of a difficult life.

This is one of the traditional Advent texts. Christians over the centuries have heard these words of the old Prophet as God's preparation of His people for the coming of a Lord and Leader who will restore and nurture the wounded people—and that's an excellent picture of Jesus, isn't it?

Change is hard—even good change. Change is stressful. People are likely to prefer more of the same, even though some effort and adjustment would bring them a better life. Have you even had a time like that? God is saying, "If you've been faithfully waiting for the world to change, this is it!"

Now skip forward nearly 600 years, and we find another prophet of God called to bring God's message to His people then. This is John the Baptist, and we find his words in Mark, chapter 1. Find Mark 1, and listen for the similarities and differences in what God is saying to these folks. Listen most of all for God's Word to US as I read Mark 1, verses 1-8. This time, it's the New International Version. [text]

There's an edge to John's words, isn't there? It's not the same as God's message to the Exiles in Babylon. John is telling the people to repent—to change their thinking about their lives. Through His Anointed One, God is coming in judgment.

Now, how do you decide which message of God is for you, when you read His Word? This is especially true about the prophets, who were speaking to people in often quite different times and situations.

It reminds me of the old joke about the fellow who was having a hard time in his life, and decided, as a last resort, to try to hear from God in Scripture. (Last resort—that tells you something. You know, *when all else fails, try God!*) Anyway, not really knowing the Bible, he takes it down from the shelf, blows off the dust, closes his eyes, and opens to a random page to see what God might say. His eye falls on Matthew 27:5, "Then Judas went away and hanged himself." Well, that was not what he expected. Maybe this was just a bad luck. So he tried again, closing his eyes and taking another chance on "Bible Lottery". This time his eyes fell on Luke 10:37: "Go and do likewise."

OK, so how do you know you're getting God's guidance? This is called, "Discernment"—listening for God's Voice to you--from Scripture, prayer, or any of the other channels God uses to "speak" to us.

Step one, "Ask God!" "Lord, please make this clear to me." The Holy Spirit is God's messenger to help us discern what God's Word is for us now. Step two, compare the audiences for these different messages in Scripture. The first people hearing Isaiah were Exiles in Babylon, living at the whim of that king. In the case of John the Baptist, those people were living in their homeland; and, true, they were practicing their faith without hindrance. But they were also suffering under terrible taxes extracted by the occupation forces of Rome. Which of these groups is closer to our own situation? It seems to me that John's listeners were more like us, and so John's message might be more appropriate for our ears. OK, then step three is, we lay this before God and ask, "Is this message of judgment and repentance what You want me to hear, Lord?"

Both messages we heard today from the Bible require “change”, don’t they? The Exiles in Babylon were going to have to disengage from the life they had made there, and return to “the Promised Land” that many of them had grown up without ever seeing. Big change! Those who heard “Johnny B” were called to face their lives and turn to God instead of running their own lives as it suited them. Big change! John was speaking for God, to get His people ready for the Holy One of God who was to come among them. And of course, John was talking about Jesus—though even he didn’t know it, early on.

Finally, find in your Bibles the little Second Letter of Peter, toward the back of the New Testament. Peter has been a disciple of Jesus, and with Jesus’ brother James became the de-facto leaders of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. In this portion of his letter, he is addressing people who have heard the message about Jesus’ Return, and who are beginning to doubt the truth of it. Maybe they should slack off, they are thinking, from the heightened holiness, if Jesus is not returning soon. So listen for Peter’s words to them AND TO US, from 2 Peter 3:8-15. *[text]*

Why has Jesus not returned and wrapped up this sorry world? Because God doesn’t want anyone to be lost, but all people to turn to Him (there’s the “repentance”) turn to Him for salvation. And God isn’t just passively waiting. God wants us to join him in bringing people to Him. If we sit on our hands in our holy huddles, then we get what we get—more delay, more people lost without God.

If you have not turned around and oriented your life toward God, God is giving you this message today. Christmas—the coming of Christ—is God’s reminder to repent, take “a U-turn Away from You”, and move with Him into His mission.

When Peter talks about “holy living”, what comes to your mind? I think I still have this childish picture of sitting quietly with hands folded, piously waiting for God. Is that what Jesus did? If we really believe Jesus is our picture of the Holy God, then his actively seeking people and bringing them to God is what “holiness” really looks like.

Through all these Scripture lessons today, the word of “change” is clear. In the first two lessons, the change God is making is imminent—at hand. In Peter’s letter, the change is coming, but has been delayed *on purpose*. What purpose? On account of us sitting, “waiting for the world to change”.

In our recent political campaigns, everyone was talking about “change”. If we’re not careful, we might be fooled into thinking that one candidate or another was promising to make change happen in our country “all by himself.” That’s not possible. This is our country. We have to be part of the change, or we’ll switch to a “blame game” when our “hero” (of whichever party) disappoints us, or when change goes in a direction we don’t like.

In a similar way, God wants us to be an active part of His change, for us to join Him in making that change happen--bringing His salvation to all people, starting with the people close to us.

Do our Life Groups encourage and hold us accountable for living God’s message? They should!

Does this Christmas find us more directly bringing hope to the hopeless, spending our time and money to connect others with God?

If not, perhaps Johnny B's message of "repentance" is for us. Instead of watching Christmas happen, we could be Christmas for someone else. Instead of "waiting for the world to change", we could be the change the world needs. Instead of passively waiting for God, we can speed God's coming, Peter wrote.

J. I. Packer, in His Book *Knowing God*, says this: "We talk glibly of the Christmas spirit, rarely meaning more by this than sentimental jollity on a family basis. It ought to mean the reproducing in human lives of the temper of Him who for our sakes became poor -- the spirit of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor -- spending and being spent to enrich their fellowmen, giving time, trouble, care, and concern to do good to others and not just their own friends -- in whatever way there seems need."

So instead of wishing someone "have a Merry Christmas", we can spur each other on with, "MAKE a Merry Christmas!" Instead of telling others how we're getting ready for Christmas, we could tell them how we're getting ready for-- CHRIST!

[video— [YouTube - Waiting on the World to Change](#)]

INTRO TO COMMUNION

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on December 7, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]