

Isaiah 40:1-11. Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" "What shall I cry?" A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. Get 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!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

"Preparing for Peace"

A voice of one calling in the desert,
"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him."

Mark 1:3

"Holy One," the disciple said, "How many people have you cured?" "Oh, almost none," the Holy One said. "But that can't be true," the disciple protested. "People come to you from everywhere." "Ah, that's true," the Holy one said, "but most people don't come to be cured. They come to feel better. If they really wanted to be cured, they would have to change." "Most of the storms of life," wrote Joan Chittister, "we could calm easily---if we ever really did something to change ourselves in the situation" (The Art of Living, p. 42).

A call for change is exactly the way in which the gospel writer Mark opened up opened his good news about the birth of Jesus in human hearts. Rather than telling a warm Christmas story, he began with a prophetic message from John the Baptist and one of Israel's greats. . . Isaiah. Like all of the Biblical prophets, it was their task to call God's children back into right relationship with their Maker by preaching the need for confession of sin and repentance. It was the Lord's way of bringing people back to the heart of God.

In her devotional, Rev. Maria Tirabassi reflected on preparing the way for the Lord by confession of our sin. She wrote: 'There are things that poison life. Attitudes, like anger or jealousy, (us against them mentality). Interpersonal events, like incest or workplace betrayal. Systemic violence, like racism, toxic waste, healthcare injustice. The first step and the only chance to heal them is to *name* them (UCC Daily Devotional, Nov. 16).

After naming comes the hard work of repentance (AKA change of heart, mind, and behavior) for the forgiveness of our sin. In her poem, "Toward the Light" Ann Weems wrote:

Too often our answer to the darkness
is not running toward Bethlehem but running away.

We ought to know by now
that we can't see where we're going in the dark.

Running away is rampant . . .

Separation is stylish:

Separation from mates, from friends, from self.

Run and tranquilize, don't talk about it, avoid.

Run away

And join the army of those who have already run away.

When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
comes only when we turn and face the darkness?

Only then will we be able to see the Light of the World.

Dressed in the anti-religious establishment garb of the prophet, John the Baptist declared that there are things that poison life and disconnect people from God. Like Isaiah, he preached that the way to restore the peace that comes from re-connection with God was to name and to repent of the sin. But unlike Isaiah, John's new task was to proclaim Jesus as God's Messiah. That's why John taught his decrease and Jesus' increase. **John proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"** (Mark 1:7-8).

Empowered by the Holy Spirit after his baptism, Jesus the prophet revealed the ways of life and death in God's Empire and challenged everything that poisons life. I like the way in which Rev. Dr. Martin Copenhagen explains Jesus' baptism of us with the Holy Spirit: "When God has a human face, and lives the kind of life we do, we are given an opportunity and the challenge to see what a life claimed by God actually looks like." As Incarnate Word of God, Jesus taught us everything he knew about the peace of God that passes all our understanding.

He said: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . .
and thy neighbor as thyself.'

He did not say: 'God bless America—only.'

He said: 'A certain man fell among thieves . . . was stripped of
his raiment . . . and left half-dead . . . two passed on
the other side. A certain Samaritan took care of him.

Who do you think was the real neighbor?

He did not say: 'Shock and awe---destroy, kill, dehumanize.

Collateral damage is necessary.'

He said: 'You have heard it said, "Hate thine enemy" . . . But I
say, what reward have you if you love them who love
you?"

He did not say: 'Together we stand---no one else matters.'

He said: 'To whom much is given, much is required.'

He did not say: 'Might makes right. America should use the
world's resources for its own luxuries.'

He said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers.'

He did not say: 'Pray for peace.'

He said: 'And why beholdest thou the mote in thy brother's eye.
Thou hypocrite first cast out the beam from thine own
eye.'

He did not say: 'They are evil. We are right.'

He said: 'Ye shall know them by their fruits.' 'In as much as you
have done it unto one of the least of these, you have
done it unto me. Inasmuch as you did it not to one of
the least of these, you did it not to me.'

And he never said: That it would be easy. That it would not take
courage. That it would be popular. That you might
not be crucified.

And he never said . . . That he would do it for us. . .

(Holy Ground, p. 341-340, "The Not-So-New-Song", Faith Dowdy Armstrong)

But what he did say were these words from John 15. 'As the
Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my
love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just
as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his
love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that
your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each
other as I have loved you.'