

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 40:1-11  
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:1-8  
December 10, 2023  
SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

### ***“Make Way”***

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Just so we're clear, I did NOT invent this story:

An Scotsman is stumbling through the woods, totally drunk, when he comes upon a preacher baptizing people in the river. He proceeds to walk into the water and subsequently bumps into the preacher. The preacher turns around and is almost overcome by the smell of alcohol. He asks the drunk, “Are you ready to find Jesus?”

The drunk answers, “Yes, I am.”

So the preacher grabs him and dunks him in the water. He pulls him up and asks the drunk, “Brother, have you found Jesus?”

The drunk says, “No, I haven't found Jesus.”

The preacher, dismayed by the answer, dunks him into the water again, for a little longer this time. He again pulls the drunk out of the water and asks, “Have you found Jesus, my brother?”

The drunk again answers, “No, I haven't found Jesus.”

By this time the preacher is at his wit's end and dunks the drunk in the water -but this time holds him down for about 30 seconds and when he begins kicking his arms and legs he pulls him up. The preacher again asks the drunk, “For the love of God, have you found Jesus?”

The drunk wipes his eyes, catches his breath and says to the preacher, “Are you sure this is where he fell in?”

Baptism. It's so much more fun if you're a Baptist.

John the Baptist was sent by God to make a way for the Lord, to prepare people for the coming of Christ. He was the perfect image of a prophet—clothed in camel's hair and wearing a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. We're not given any of his family background here, although we know that his mother was Mary's cousin Elizabeth. He just seems to have appeared in the wilderness. That's not where we would go if we wanted to attract a crowd. We would go to the city. In this case the city came to John. Word spread about this remarkable prophet, and before long crowds were traveling out of the cities and towns to hear him preach. And he wasn't preaching something light and easy either. John was preaching about repenting of sins, and he was doing something else. He was **baptizing** people.

John took two traditions and created a new thing. The Jews washed or immersed themselves in water for spiritual cleansing. Many still practice this. While this cleansing might also wash away dirt, the primary purpose is to wash away spiritual impurity. But this was done all the time and people carried out these cleansings themselves. They didn't need outside help. The other tradition came from conversion to Judaism. When Gentiles converted to Judaism a cleansing rite of immersion or baptism was done.

John's baptism did involve immersion and did involve water, but what he created was neither of these already existing things. It was new. John created a baptism for Jews to demonstrate repentance of sin and a turning around of their life to God. John's baptism assumed faith, and it was about making a radical life change to recommit to God. It was about changing spiritual direction. People confessed their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River.

John came to "make way" for the Messiah to come. He came to create a path, and there are multiple quotes from the Old Testament in this passage including the one we read today. Isaiah spoke of making a highway for God, a highway in which every valley shall be raised up and every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall be made smooth and the rugged places a plain. That's a lot of work if we're talking about more than poetic expressions, which ought to tell us that real repentance is no easy thing.

If you haven't been to my house, you won't know that I have a pond with a waterfall and some spectacularly large fish who escaped certain death thanks to the Manzones who rescued them when an estate was sold. But we USED to have TWO ponds, an upper one and a lower one. The theory was that one would pour over into the next and create a natural waterfall. It never really worked out that well. After struggling for years we finally decided to fill in the upper pond. We emptied it. We hauled out the remaining plants. We pulled up the plastic liner, and we bought dirt. We bought a veritable mountain of dirt. But then we had to transport it one wheelbarrow at a time from the driveway through the gate across the yard and into the very large hole. This was not an easy undertaking! I'm not even sure we could do it today. But fill it in we did! Hour after hour we worked until we transformed a hole into level ground. It took two whole days. The mountain in the driveway disappeared and the valley in the yard also disappeared.

The imagery of creating a level path and repentance is not intuitive, but turning one's life around is work. Getting rid of all the obstacles we put in place of God requires identifying them in the first place, and most of us have put our preconceived ideas and prejudices behind closed doors. Sometimes we have to remove things one wheelbarrow at a time. Change involves shifting our priorities. It can involve leveling pride. Repentance isn't the end. It's the beginning. But because we have such negative associations with the word, I'm going to shift gears for a minute and use the Greek term—*metanoia*.

*Metanoia*, the word we sometimes have translated as "repentance," literally means a "change of mind" or to "go beyond the mind you have." We had one set of assumptions and plans, and then we thought again. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea. We were headed in one direction, and we realized that the road we were on led off a cliff. We turned around. We reversed course. We

were engaged in negative and self-destructive behavior and came to our senses. We stopped what we were doing and sought help. Our image of fiery preachers of yesteryear shouting, "Repent sinners!" is very emotionally charged and largely about moral condemnation. While these followers of John did confess their sins, they did so in order to let them go. We can leave the condemnation out of the picture. This is about removing burdens, not adding them. John, and Jesus are calling us to look at things differently and to turn in a new direction. Metanoia brings transformation.

John did not come to draw attention to himself. He made it clear that he was preparing the way for one much greater than himself, "the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." John said, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Untying the sandal straps of another person was viewed as such a demeaning task even Jewish slaves could refuse to do it. Yet John said he was not worthy to do even that. John came to point us in a new direction, to point us to Jesus.

Sometimes I think this time of year is the hardest time of all to find Jesus. Christmas has become such a blatantly pagan and commercial enterprise, and yet it is all dressed up in a thin veneer of Christianity. Somehow saying "Merry Christmas" is supposed to be virtuous. I often think it would be more helpful if we could just say "Happy Saturnalia" and be done with it. It's the Roman mid-winter solstice festival that so many of our traditions are based on. The calendar changed. December 25 used to be the solstice. On Saturnalia people exchanged gifts. They decorated their homes with greens and holly. They feasted. Persecuted Christians chose to celebrate Christ's birth at this time because that way no one would guess what they were up to. They would blend in! It was a great disguise. But maybe it's time to separate the two. If we could separate Christmas trees from Christ and just be happy because we have a pretty tree in the house it would be so much easier than bending ourselves into knots trying to make it something to do with Jesus. It's a pagan German tradition. Nothing wrong with tradition. Yule logs are a British pagan tradition. Santa Claus? A blend of a 4<sup>th</sup> century Greek bishop named Nicholas, a Norse God named Odin, and the British combination of the two, Father Christmas. There are also Dutch and Scandinavian versions. My great niece and nephew now put out clogs out on December 5<sup>th</sup> for Sinterklaas, or Saint Nicholas, to put gifts in. Sinterklaas rides a white horse and has assistants. He looks more like a fancy bishop than the current American version which is a result of the Cocoa Cola company's advertising campaign in the 1930s.

For many Americans Santa has completely replaced Jesus. We don't have to get rid of Santa, or Christmas trees or gift giving, but we do need to know what we are doing. We can have fun with traditions without pretending they are Christian. There is nothing wrong with having some mid-winter fun, but to find Jesus requires *metanoia*, a change of mind and perspective. It means having eyes to see what is really important, not the gifts, not the decorations and not even the gatherings, but the kingdom of God and a new way to live. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-11

**40** Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.

**2** 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 sins.

**3** A voice of one calling:  
"In the wilderness prepare  
the way for the Lord;  
make straight in the desert  
a highway for our God.

**4** Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.

**5** And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,  
and all people will see it together.  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

**6** A voice says, "Cry out."  
And I said, "What shall I cry?"  
"All people are like grass,  
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

**7** The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.  
Surely the people are grass.

**8** The grass withers and the flowers fall,  
but the word of our God endures forever."

Mark 1:1-8

**1** The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of  
God, **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way"—

**3** "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'"

**4** And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of  
repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** 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. **6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair,  
with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And  
this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps

of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”