

North Kildonan United Church

6th December 2020 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The Beginning of the Good News”

Isaiah 40: 1-11

II Peter 3: 8-15a

Mark 1: 1-8

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Many years ago a friend and I decided to make a road trip to B.C. Saskatchewan was the farthest west I had ever ventured so everything on this trip was new and interesting, including our drive through the Rocky Mountains and the ferry ride to Vancouver Island.

That last day of travel west was long and by the time we arrived at the campground it was getting late. To beat the crowd in the morning I decided I should go have a shower. The sun was setting but the campground had lights illuminating the pathway to the showers.

Fortunately, it was late enough in the day that I didn't need to wait for a shower stall. Unfortunately, once I was ready to head back to our camping spot, the lights had been turned off and it was pitch black outside. Where in the world was I, which direction was I to go?

Eventually, by the light of the moon and in recognizing a few familiar landmarks, I was able to find my way back to our campsite, but it was a frustrating and somewhat scary journey. If only I had a flashlight, if only the lights had been left on, if only I possessed a better sense of direction.

That night I needed a light, a flashlight, or a guide who knew the way to get me where I needed to go. So too do we often need an inner light, a guide, a spiritual light, if you will, to reorient our lives and help us discover the right path.

John the Baptist, in his preaching and baptizing, was a guide, albeit a rough and ready kind of guide, to those seeking a light in their darkness, those seeking forgiveness and healing, those earnestly desiring a new way to fullness of life, because clearly the old way wasn't working.

John knew that he was just a messenger of God, just a minister of God's grace, and he knew that his role was to prepare people for the one who would truly bring forgiveness and newness of life to all. John was but a voice of one crying out in the wilderness, echoing the promise of prophets of long ago, the promise that God would come and redeem his people. As Isaiah promised and so we heard:

"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."

John knew that his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, was the promised one, the longed for Messiah, the gentle yet strong shepherd who cares for his flock. John's role was to prepare the people for Jesus and he was certain about the nature of that preparation. The author of Mark's Gospel, the first written Gospel we have, is clear about who this Jesus is and what this Jesus means. Remember the first words of today's Gospel:

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This introduction is Mark's shorthand way of saying that God is about to do a new and profound thing, unparalleled before or since in human history. The Son of God, in human form, walking and living and dying as one of us.

So here we are, standing by the Jordan river, and before us is a rough and ready, wild-eyed evangelist named John, shouting to those of us around him, shouting that we must prepare for the coming of the Lord. The prophecies of the years gone by are soon going to be fulfilled. Come and prepare yourself for the most life changing experience of your life. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the adventure has just begun.

Even now, Jesus is just around the corner, perhaps watching from a discreet distance, watching as his cousin John baptizes those who are seeking forgiveness. As he plunges those to be baptized under Jordan's water, John proclaims with a full and joyful voice: *'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.'*

Soon, very soon, Jesus, in solidarity with those who will become his people, is also baptized by John, an act that will take on profound meaning after Christ's resurrection. And at his baptism, the Spirit descends upon Jesus and the heavenly voice proclaims: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* So begins the ministry of Jesus.

Harkening back to the beginning of this sermon, and to put that story into some sort of context, we might say that John would be the light I needed as I stumbled my way along a dark path, but Jesus would be both light and the companion who guided me safely home. John is important in the Christian story, oh so important, but he only goes so far, and he knows his limitations.

John called those who would hear to repent of their sins. Repentance is often misunderstood, because too often it has been wielded as a sword by those trying to scare people into heaven. It's the stuff of bad Hollywood movies, as nasty looking clerics demand, on pain of death, that a sinner repent of their sins. It's the stuff of billboards that litter the countryside: "*Ye must repent of your sins.*"

But what is repentance? To repent is to come to our senses, to turn from that which is life destroying and to turn to the One who is the giver of life. To repent is to turn to God, to trust in God, to turn away from all those aspects of our life that block our relationship with God. To repent, to turn to Christ, to offer to Christ all that we have done and said that we seek forgiveness for, and to trust that we are forgiven, to believe that life can begin again, that we don't need to continue on the ways of life that just simply don't work for us. It is like a driver holding the map the wrong way, wondering why they are not arriving at their destination. Then they reorient the map, look around them and head onto the right road. To repent is to challenge the so called wisdom of our day, and to understand the world through the loving mind of Christ.

Recently I came across a poem by Brian Bilston. I know very little about him, other than the fact that he is still alive and writes some pretty profound stuff. This poem is called **Refugees** and to me it sums up the message of repentance, the need to see everything from a new perspective, from Christ's perspective. He begins this way:

Refugees

*They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us*

*Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These people are just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way.*

Sadly, not an uncommon sentiment, usually less poetically put, but the meaning is clear. The judgement, the condemnation, the lack of charity and basic human compassion are in full display in this text.

But what if we were see this in a new way, a fresh way, to read these words in a repentant manner, to actually embrace the meaning of repentance as turning around and going the right way, God's way. An act of repentance by turning the words upside down. Hear this poem read from bottom to top.

*The world can be looked at another way
Do not be so stupid to think that
A place should only belong to those who are born there
These people are just like us
It is not okay to say
Build a wall to keep them out
Instead let us
Share our countries
Share our homes
Share our food
They cannot
Go back to where they came from
We should make them
Welcome here
They are not
Cut-throats and thieves
With bombs up their sleeves
Layabouts and loungers
Chancers and scroungers
We need to see them for who they really are
Should life have dealt a different hand
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
So do not tell me
They have no need of our help.*

Amen.