



Sermon of December 5, 1999



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"HE'S BACK"

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

You all know what it is like at the airport during the holidays, cars piled up in big traffic jams. You can't even get up to the curb these days of the year. There was a woman who went out to the airport to pick up some friends who were coming to visit her at Christmas time. She could only get as close as about a block away, but she could see her friends standing at the curb. So she got out of the car, and hollered, "Alice, Kathy, over here, over here." They heard this familiar voice, picked up their bags, and went over to her car. The man in the car behind her stuck his head out of the window, and said, "Excuse me ma'am, but would you mind hollering for Harold?"

I always imagined it was a voice like that Isaiah had in mind when he wrote, "O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength." It's a marvelous passage as read to us as the Old

Testament lesson for this morning. It is one of the most familiar of the Christmas passages, made famous by Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*.

Isaiah wrote these words as the Word of God to the captives in Babylon. It is the announcement that they are free now, they can go home. That's why it begins with these beautiful words, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." I can hear the tenor singing that, the opening words of Handel's *Messiah*, "Comfort ye my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." He does not sing it loudly. He sings it softly. "Tell her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

The prophets saw that the Exile in Babylon was the moral consequence of the choices that the nation had made. They made wrong choices, trusting in material things, in arms and in idols and in money, rather than trusting God.

Historically what happened was that the Babylonians defeated Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, then took a portion of the population of Jerusalem back with them to Babylon, as sort of an insurance against an uprising. It was cheaper to move potential trouble makers back to Babylon than to garrison an army in a far away, hostile land. That's how the Jew's got to Babylon. They were "ransom captive" in Babylon.

The 40th chapter of Isaiah is the announcement that that history is over. You can turn away from that past. You can go home now. God is offering you a new future. You can live a new life now. "Comfort my people." Tell them that the war is over, they have paid for their sins, they can go home now.

Then comes this beautiful vision, a highway is being constructed in the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. On that highway God, himself, will come and take his people home. So in the wilderness "prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

And there are even engineering instructions included in this passage. "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill be made low; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."

God is coming to set you free, to redeem you from bondage, and to lead you to a new life. You can see why the Christians said that Isaiah is talking about Christmas.

Isaiah also says there is a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." The Christians said that voice is John the Baptist. He is the voice crying in the wilderness to make ready for the coming of God into our life to give us a new future.

They had to deal, therefore, with John the Baptist. He was more popular than Jesus. He was a national hero. He was a martyred hero. He condemned King Herod's immoral behavior. Herod was not a common sinner, he was a serious degenerate. He was guilty of murder, incest, fratricide, and that was just the beginning. John the Baptist condemned him. So Herod cut off John the Baptist's head. Which means that you now have a popular hero who has been martyred by a evil, despised king.

You don't forget that. That's the stuff of legends. So in that first century in Palestine, John was

the most respected man. He was, in fact, the measure of greatness. Everyone was held up to the image of John the Baptist to measure greatness. John had that kind of respect. He was a great man, with prophetic fire and amazing courage. Jesus himself said of John the Baptist, "No one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist."

So the Christians, when they talked about who Jesus was, had to deal with who John was. Who is John? This man who, in his time, was more famous than Jesus. They wrestled with it. Who is greater, Jesus or John?

Isaiah helped them out. John, they said, is the voice that Isaiah was talking about, crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Jesus is the Lord John was preparing us to receive.

John even looks the part. He came from the wilderness. He was a desert ascetic, like a hermit or a monk. He had long hair. He wore animal skins for clothing. He ate locusts and wild honey. John, they said, is obviously the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." They were sure of that. John is the voice preparing us for the Messiah.

Except John's message was not "comfort my people." John did not speak "tenderly" to Jerusalem. John was at the River Jordan, on the edge of the wilderness, shouting (hollering is probably the better word), "Repent; for the Kingdom of God is coming." His voice bouncing off the desert walls: repent, repent, repent. His voice was heard clear up in the Temple precincts in Jerusalem: repent, repent, repent. His voice like a mighty wind went up into Galilee, to Herod's palace at Machaerus, and bounced off the walls there: repent, repent, repent. His voice echoed in the consciences of all the people of the land: repent.

John had only one message. He stands there, knee deep in Jordan's muddy waters, looks at you and me with these dark, deep-set, penetrating eyes, and says, "Repent." You probably won't see John the Baptist on any Christmas cards this year, but he is part of the story. He is the main figure, the dominant figure, in Advent as we prepare for Christmas.

In the lectionary of the Church, the lessons we read to prepare for Christmas, every year John the Baptist is there. Always in the second week, and sometimes in the third, too. That means you've got about a fifty-fifty chance of getting to Christmas without seeing John the Baptist.

But the Church decided a long time ago that John the Baptist was not only the one who prepared Israel for the coming of the Messiah, John the Baptist should be the one who prepares you for the celebration of Christmas. I hear people say almost every year, "That's sure a strange way to prepare for Christmas, because Christmas is about love." Everybody knows that.

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
Star and angels gave the sign.

So why John the Baptist, hollering repentance? There is a reason. The danger in preaching unconditional love at Christmas time is that we will think that nothing is required of us. But you

still hear it. Christmas is about love. You will see sentimental TV specials that will always end with some word about this being what Christmas is all about. Christmas is about love. You will send Christmas cards with just "Love" written on it. That's all you need. It says it all. Love is what Christmas is all about.

I am sure that is why Christmas is so popular, both inside and outside of the Church. Here's the stable, the manger, a baby in the manger, given to us unconditionally, because God loves us. It's irresistible. "God so loved the world that he gave his Son." That's the heart of Christmas, love.

"Jesus loves me, this I know." Jesus asks something of me, this I forget. That's the problem. Christianity is about unconditional love, which means I am accepted as I am. But that doesn't mean that I should stay the way I am.

According to Mark, the baby who is in the manger, grew up, and preached the same message that John preached, repent. It is right there in the first chapter. Our text for this morning is the first eight verses of the chapter, the introduction part. The ninth verse begins the story of the baptism of Jesus. Then the Temptation. Then in the fourteenth verse, just five verses away, it says, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe this good news.'"

Do you see the sequence? First the gift, and then the demand. First there's a babe in the manger, then there is Jesus, the man, teaching in Galilee. First there is the gift of love, then there's the question, "What are you going to do now that you have received this love?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, who joined the resistance against Hitler, established an underground seminary during those days. Out of that experience he wrote a book called, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It's a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.

In it he makes the distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace is going to church to hear the comfortable words, the good news about God's unconditional love. Then snuggling in it, as if it were a down comforter, leaving church with a warm, peaceful feeling, but not letting the one who brought that love into the world, who died for you because of that love, challenge the way you are now living.

In the Bible repentance is not just remorse for the past, feeling sorry that you did something. In the Bible repentance is making a decision about the future, how you are going to live. It's the realization that God is giving you a new opportunity for life, and seizing that opportunity.

The righteous were always telling Jesus, go tell the sinners to repent. Instead, he told the sinners, you are forgiven, the righteous he told to repent, especially those in power, the priests, scribes, Pharisees, and the Sadducees. They were good people, moral people by any standard. They kept waiting for Jesus to go tell other people to repent, to stop their sinning. Jesus kept telling the strong and the righteous in this world to start doing something good. He told them to repent of their pride, their smugness, their hypocrisy and self-righteousness, their narrow prejudice and enormous greed. Jesus did not tell the weak to repent. He healed them and forgave them. He told the strong to repent.

I believe that God gives every generation an opportunity to choose life, to choose a new future. That is what this gospel is telling us. "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom is at hand." The time comes to us fulfilled in every generation. The opportunity is here for us to do something individually with our lives, and corporately as a nation.

I believe that we are at such a time at the beginning of a new millennium. God is offering us new life, offering us opportunity for greatness. Never has there been such an opportunity, because never has there been such power and wealth, and never have so many people possessed it. What are we going to do with it?

I believe that is the moral question of our time. What are we going to do with all that we have? Are we going to use it to address the enormous needs of our communities, or are we going to consume it on things that we probably don't need? What God gives every generation is the possibility to do something great with what God has given that people.

The most visible example of that opportunity, that new future that God gives to nations, is to be seen today in Ireland. It's a wonderful thing that has happened, and almost in the season of Advent. It provides us with a wonderful illustration of "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom is at hand; repent, and do something with it."

For 300 years the people in Ireland have lived in the past. For 350 years, really, all they have done is remember the past. They dwelt on the past, and the more they dwelt on the past, the more self-righteous they became, finding reasons to say we are the virtuous side, they are the one that need to repent. They are the ones that need to change, not us. But slowly, one by one, on both sides, people began to repent, to look not at the past, but to the future.

One of the first to do so was a man named Shane O'Doherty. He was the first former IRA member to come out publicly for peace. Twenty years ago he was sent to jail for mailing letter bombs. At his trial as a terrorist for the IRA, he had to sit and listen to people tell what it was like to open those letters. Fourteen people testified against him, all innocent victims, many of them mutilated because of what he had done.

He said it was sitting in that court, face to face with people who had been harmed by his actions, that his conversion began. But it was completed in prison, in his cell, as he was reading scripture. First he experienced Jesus' love for him. Then he experienced Jesus' requirement of him. He knew he had to change. He read in the Bible that Jesus, too, was a revolutionary of sorts. He had come to overthrow a power that was holding the world in bondage. But he specifically rejected the temptation to use violence in order to do it. He told his disciples the Kingdom will not come with violence.

When he got out of prison, O'Doherty started to talk about building a new future in Ireland, instead of just repeating the past. He found that his life was now being threatened by his former colleagues. But he continued to do it, because, he said, "I believe that one person is able to make a difference just by talking about peace, just by making his witness. You may not see the fruits right away. You may not see it in three months. You may not see it in three years. You may not see it in thirty years. But I believe that peace is going to come."

Now, this year, 1999, it has come, the possibility of a new future has come to a nation. They must choose now, they must repent. It begins in any nation, in any community, with one person, then another, and then another, saying, "I'm going to accept the future that God is giving to us, rather than simply repeating the past."

Every year in Advent they are there, both John and Jesus, saying, "Repent; for the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom is at hand." God is offering us a new future. Choose it. Turn away from the past. Accept what God is offering us.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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