

This week's Scripture - Sunday 6th December 2020 – Advent 2

Isaiah 40.1-11; Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3.8-15a; Mark 1.1-8

Isaiah 40.1-1: The prophet Isaiah speaks a word of hope to the people who have suffered in exile - God is about to bring the people home. God knows that they “have paid double for their sins.” In other words, they’ve been through too much. They didn’t deserve what happened to them, but they do deserve the comfort God is bringing to them. God is the one who will lead them through the wilderness, as God did for their ancestors long ago. God’s justice is restorative: the valleys are lifted up, the mountains brought low, and rough places are made into plains. God is evening out the world. The prophet hears the words to cry out, but they wonder what it is they are supposed to cry out, because the people are like grass, they will die out, but God’s promises endure forever. Instead, the people are called to cry out in rejoicing, for God is arriving to be their shepherd, to lead the people into safety.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 sings praise to God who has brought the people out of exile, remembering the promises of old and restoring their prosperity. The psalmist sings of how God’s salvation is with them. Similar to the evening out images of justice from the prophet Isaiah, the psalmist speaks of steadfast love and faithfulness meeting together, righteousness and peace kissing each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness descends from the sky. With God, everything good comes together. God leads in goodness and blessing, for the homeland the people are returning to.

2 Peter 3.8-15a: The writer of 2 Peter encourages the readers and listeners who are waiting for Christ’s return. 2 Peter, according to some scholars, may have been written as late as 150 years after the birth of Christ. Generations have gone at this point from those who witnessed Christ and believed he would return in their lifetime. The writer reminds the people that God’s time is not our time. Echoing to the images Jesus used in Mark 13 (part of last week’s reading), Jesus will come like a thief in the night. The faithful wait for a new heaven and earth, living godly lives. While we wait, the writer encourages the faithful to be at peace, to remember the teachings of Paul and others before them, with the wisdom of God.

Mark 1.1-8: The beginning of Mark’s account of the Gospel, of the Good News of Jesus Christ, begins with the words of Isaiah, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” and immediately turns to John the Baptist coming out of the wilderness. John came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. Many scholars believe that John may have been part of the Essenes, a group that had separated from the rest of society, settling near the Dead Sea (the Dead Sea Scrolls are believed to be from this group). They separated themselves from others, awaiting the day of the Lord, the day of judgment to come. They ate a mostly vegetarian diet, and practiced ritual purification, using the practice of the mikveh, a source of running water, in accordance with Jewish purification rituals. John, however, came out of seclusion, came out of the wilderness, and came to where the people were: gathered at the river Jordan. The people came to be baptized, confessing their sins, and John proclaimed that one was coming after him, who was more powerful than him. The one who came after John would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Reflection: A On this second Sunday of Advent, we know that God’s ways are not our own. God works by evening out—the mountains are brought down, and the valleys are brought up. In many ways, Isaiah’s words echo the song of Mary—the powerful are brought down from their thrones, and the lowly are lifted up (Luke 1:52). The way of God does not seem fair for those who are powerful, for those who are oppressors, for those who consume and take—but for those who have had everything taken from them, for those who have lost, it is indeed good news. It was good news for the people who were returning home from exile, having their lives restored. It was good news that John the Baptist proclaimed for everyone who gathered at the river. Repentance was a turning back to God’s ways, and in doing so, those who gathered gave up their power, gave up their control, to allow God in. But this is our hope: repent, and believe the Good News: God has come for everyone. For everyone, God will bring down the powerful. For everyone, God will lift up the lowly. For everyone, God sent us Jesus, so that everyone might have new life.

Praying with others or alone...

Call to Worship

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Love your neighbour as yourselves.

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Turn to God's ways, and believe in the Good News.

Prayer of Brokenness / Confession

God of Preparation, You have been preparing for us since before the world began.

Your intentions for us are good and have always been.

We confess that our short-sightedness means that we often miss You at work in our world and in our lives.

We focus on things that are fleeting, that slip through our grasp, instead of grounding ourselves in Your intentions for us:

to love one another and care for the earth You made.

In this season of preparation, as we prepare for Christmas and the New Year,

help us not to lose sight of what You have prepared for us:

a new heaven and earth, a new life that begins now.

In the name of the One who came, and is coming again into our world and lives in a new way, we pray.

Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness / Blessing

God is a God of Beginnings.

There is always time for a fresh start, a turning back, a breaking open to something new.

God is with you, now, guiding you into the newness of this life.

Embrace God's ever-expanding love,

and know that you are forgiven, and have new life in Christ.

Share the Good News.

Prayer

Great Voice, who calls to us in our own wildernesses: help us to prepare Your way.

Help us to clear out the muckiness of the world that creeps in:

selfish ambition, greed, envy, hunger for power and control.

Instead, help us to prepare with love, joy, hope, peace, kindness, and mercy.

Guide us in Your ways of preparing, by looking at what we have and what we can share, by turning to the needs of others and making sure they are met.

May the spirit of gratitude and generosity not be for a season, but instead, become our way of life.

Cry out to us in our wildernesses of the world, and call us into Your ways,

for Your reign is breaking through in our world and in our lives.

Amen.