

The Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken

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Isaiah 40:1–11

Last week, a coming King. Today, a prophetic voice. The second Sunday of Advent brings the prophetic voice of Isaiah and the prophetic person of John the Baptizer. You know it's Advent when John makes his appearance in the wilderness, calling Israel out away from temple and synagogue back into the wilderness. John is a figure straight out of the pages of the Old Testament. Camel's hair, leather belt, locusts, wild honey – he's the complete package, looking like Elijah and appearing where Elijah had disappeared.

John was the bridge between the old and the new, between prophesy and fulfillment. He has one foot in the Old Testament and the other in the New. He came preaching and baptizing, preaching repentance and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Proselyte baptisms were known. When you became a convert to Judaism, you were washed of your former life. But John wasn't preaching to converts. He was preaching to Israelites, the insiders, those who were called God's people. The call to repentance begins not with the outsider but the insider, not with the world but with us.

As rough around the edges as John seems to be, he came to bring God's comfort and peace. "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, her iniquity is pardoned, she has received double from the Lord's hand for all her sins." Not just enough forgiveness, but double forgiveness, forgiveness overflowing like a baptismal flood, forgiveness that overflows even to those who have sinned against us. That's what God sent John from the wilderness to proclaim: forgiveness, pardon, peace, a baptism that brings forgiveness, and even more: one is mightier, whose sandal John was not worthy to untie, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John's task and purpose was to point prophetically to Jesus. "Behold the Lamb of God." And having pointed to Jesus, his job was to get out of the way. "He must increase, I must decrease," John said.

The advent voice calls out, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." Advent is a time of preparation. Not so much a preparation for the holidays and holy days of Christmas and Epiphany, though it is that too. It is a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus in glory and power and might. The progressing light on the advent wreath is not only a countdown to Christmas but a reminder that the dawn is here and the Day is coming like a thief in the night. "The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." This is certain and sure for this one reason: "The mouth of the Lord has spoken it."

God speaks and it is so. The Word is the event itself. God said, "Be light" and light there is. That's how the Word works. It may take a thousand years or more to happen but once the mouth of the Lord has spoken it will happen because in the speaking it has already happened. "A day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day with the Lord," Peter reminds us. It's not "slowness" on God's part but patience. We're the ones in a hurry, wanting instant everything, now more than ever. If we have to wait for anything we lose interest and move on to something else. But God is never in a hurry. His is time, and his eternity. From his eternal perspective, it's all a present moment called "now."

God's slowness to act is really His patience. He wants all to repent and not to perish. He's willing to wait it out, to put up with the weedy wheat field. He's willing to pull out the backhoe and the bulldozer of His Law to level the mountains and fill in the valleys and carve a highway of holiness through the wilderness of your life and mine. That may not be pleasant, just as John was not a pleasant character, certainly not someone you would want to run into on the street corner. No, if John showed up, you'd avoid him and cross over to the other side. But we have to deal with him because he is God's voice preaching to us from the wilderness to get ready for the Lord.

The voice cries out again. "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Only the Word stands forever. This past week we saw how even the tall, sturdy tree is easily toppled by the wind. The grass withers, the flower fades, even the beauty of the created order is transient, passing away. We see the same thing going on in our bodies, on our faces, in the world. Things that once seemed so strong and sturdy now appear so fragile. Things that once appeared to stand forever now lay toppled like so many trees and power lines. Don't

underestimate the breath of God when it blows. It makes a canyon wind seem like a summer breeze by comparison.

But that breath of God is the Spirit of God that blows over baptismal water to make new and alive in the death and life of Jesus. It is the breath that blew over the disciples in the upper room from the lips of Jesus and upon the whole church at Pentecost. It's wind that consumes and refines, that burns up and purifies, the kills and makes alive. If we don't understand this, we cannot understand what is happening around us and in us. God kills and He makes alive. He brings down to the depths of Sheol and He raises up.

Peter reminds us that the coming day of the Lord that sneaks in on the world as a thief in the night is a day of destruction. The heavens will pass away with a roar, the heavenly bodies will be burned up, the very elemental things will be dissolved in the blast furnace of God's judgment, and the earth and the works that are done in it will be exposed. But there is a promise in all of this destruction: a new heavens and a new earth, a new creation in which righteousness dwells.

To the unbeliever, which is also the unbeliever in each of us called the old Adam, this means terrible destruction. Much worse than any natural disaster. But to the believer, that fiery destruction is a refining fire, burning away the dross of sin and leaving behind the pure gold of holiness and righteousness. The blast furnace is always bad news for the impurities but good news for the gold.

It's always that way with God and His Word. Death and life. Destruction and creation. Wrath and mercy. In our Baptism, we die and rise. In baptismal repentance, we die and rise. At the Lord's Supper, we partake both of Jesus' death and His life. The grass withers, the flowers fade, and we wither and fade along with them. But the Word of our God will stand forever. And in the power of that Word you will stand forever. Not by your doing but by God's doing, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Your mouths too are called to speak. When Jesus commissioned His disciples to make disciples by baptizing and teaching, He was sending them into the wilderness in the way of John the Baptizer, to prepare the world for His coming. You are part of that as you are part of the church. The church is John the Baptizer of the end times. We have one foot in the present age and the other foot in the age to come, straddling old and new creation. In Christ, we are already a new creation, and yet we live in this body of the old. The call is the same, "Repent,

for the kingdom of God is at hand.” The means are the same: Baptizing and preaching. Word and Sacrament.

We are the first in the pool at the brink of summer, inviting the rest of the world to hop in the water with us. Summer is near. Day is at hand. The Lord is coming. Prepare the way of the Lord.

The world will view us much the way many people viewed John the Baptizer as being weird. Not of this world. Crazy even. Yes, many people today think that those of us who actually believe in the actual coming of an actual Jesus are deluded if not downright crazy. As I said last week, many people think we are like Linus sitting in the pumpkin patch waiting for the Great Pumpkin to arrive .

In the verses immediately preceding our epistle, Peter said there would be scoffers who follow their own passions and deliberately ignore the fact that by the Word of God the heavens and the earth were formed and by the water of the Flood the world that then existed was destroyed. And by the same Word, the heavens and the earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. I’m sure the neighbors laughed at Noah until the water came.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

That prophetic voice is speaking as much to the church today as it once did to Israel of the Old Testament. The Church is God’s Israel of the end times. His chosen people, His royal priesthood, His holy nation, His city set on a hill. We are to be a beacon reflecting the light of Christ into the ever-darkening world. We have good news in a world filled with bad news: The Lord God comes with power and might to save. He came by virgin mother, crib and cross. He comes by Word and water and Supper. He is coming in glory to raise the dead, to bring life and a new creation. He is making all things new. He comes as a shepherd to tend His flock, to carry the lambs in His arms, to lead those with young. He comes as the Good Shepherd with goodness and mercy that we may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The advent voice calls us to be put on the scratchy camel’s hair of John, to take up the kingdom cry, “Repent,” to see in ourselves our need for God’s forgiveness, to have the

mountains leveled, the valleys filled, to proclaim the goodness of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

There is nothing sure and lasting and certain in this world. Not the trees, not the mountains, not the grass or the flowers. Only this: The Word of our God stands forever. You can be sure of that. And by that Word you are forgiven, you are justified, you are sanctified, you are glorified all in Jesus, all for Jesus' sake.

It is sure; it is certain; it will happen. The mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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