

Sermon – December 10, 2023
“Prepared for Joy?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill open hearts, anoint the sharing of these words, and through them, bless your people. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out into fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How is our Christmas decoration progressing? Whether our approach is simple or extravagant, let me encourage us to take time and do those things that help us better grasp the depths of the season we are journeying through and into. Does anyone put a nativity set out in your home? Show of hands—not a test, just looking to see if any do. What characters or figures do you have in your set? Shepherds? Wisemen? Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus? Sheep, cows, doves? Any angels? What character from the Advent scriptures is missing from our nativity sets? Jesus may not be there yet, but baby Jesus is typically included when Christmas arrives. Who is missing? Let me help us out. Do the words, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness” bring anyone to mind? Yes, John the Baptist. There is no camel hair-covered, wild honey and locust-eating man crying out for the coming of Christ included in our manger scenes. During most Advent seasons we read about his role of calling Judea to repentance, but we don’t include him in our nativity sets. He was an infant, maybe six months old at the time of Jesus’

birth. But we don't have a second family standing off a bit in another house with their child. John is so very different from all of the other characters in the scripture we read this time of year. Yet his message of repentance is a key part of our Advent season. His message seems so unlike the message of the birth of the Christ child, yet his message points to the coming of comfort from God.

In our scripture reading this morning, Isaiah is speaking to the people of Israel who are in exile in Babylon. Up until this point in the book of Isaiah, the message from God has been one of coming judgment and a need for Israel to turn to God and obey His decrees. Now the message changes. God speaks comfort to His people. If we look closely at the words, we will realize that God is speaking to Jerusalem as one speaks to a beloved wife. All of the pronouns and nouns in Hebrew are feminine. God is speaking to His people tenderly as a loving husband would speak to his wife who is greatly loved. God may have anger with His people for their sin, but now God speaks as a husband who speaks from his lasting, steadfast love for his precious bride. That is the context of the opening of our Isaiah passage.

Verse 3 of Isaiah's words should bring to mind John the Baptist's cry in the wilderness as he called the people of Judea back to God. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" Isaiah's use of the word "prepare" might cause us to think about all of the preparations that we plan to accomplish as we prepare for our celebrations of Christmas. There are gifts to purchase, plans to make, menus to prepare, homes to clean, events and celebrations to attend, cards to send, trees to decorate, nativity sets to put up The list we try to complete as we prepare for Christmas can be very long as we anticipate the coming of Jesus and our celebration of his birth. In the midst of the busyness, we should stop and ask ourselves, "How are we preparing our hearts for the coming of God in the flesh?" We should have on our list of things to do during Advent one key spiritual task to prepare our hearts for God's coming. Isaiah's call for a highway for God is for us today a call to make a path for God to come straight into our hearts, to prepare our hearts to receive God. How are we doing with that preparation? Does our list of things to do include time to prepare our hearts for God? Do we have this on our list of things to get done before Christmas? A prepared heart is Isaiah's message for Israel and will also be John's message for the people of Judea: to open their hearts through repentance to the coming of God. The idea of repentance that Isaiah had was not a call to stop doing wrong things. John's call likewise was not a call to start a new

program to help us get our messy selves straightened out. Their call from God to people was to repentance. Their call was not a calling for some type of behavior modification program where we strive in our strength to change ourselves. Repentance was and is today a call from God, who loves us, to turn to Him, to accept grace, find forgiveness, and be open to what God is doing to transform us into His people. Repentance is also a call to God's people that God is coming. The hills, valleys, uneven ground, and rough places will not be able to stop God's coming. God is unstoppable, and God is coming to prepared hearts. What John called people to was a change of heart, a redirection of hearts to God, a turning away from sin and a turning towards God. Isaiah tells us that as we become prepared, as our hearts become open to God's coming, the glory of the Lord will be revealed. When I begin to engage the idea of the glory of the Lord being revealed, I think of the throne room of God surrounded by the host of heaven praising God. I think about God's mighty hand raised against Egypt as He brings His people out of cruel slavery. My own idea of God's glory is connected to the giving of the Law, as God comes to the top of Mt. Sinai and the people tremble in fear at His coming. I also think that the beauty of God's creation as it surrounds me every day provides me fresh glimpses of God's glory in those manifestations of God's presence. What we are seeking to grasp when we think about God's glory is how we can receive a manifestation that captures the fullness of who God is, of the absolute completeness of God¹. Our human minds and understanding seek to develop grand, extreme expressions of God to help us grasp God's glory. Yet, Christmas is coming and the manifestation we receive of God's glory is a child lying in a manger who will reveal God completely to us.

Isaiah is telling us that God is coming. God is not distant, far off above the heavens, looking down on creation from a distant, unseen place. God is coming. God is here. God has come for all people. The Lord God comes to bring His people back from their exile from Him because of their sin. Isaiah is telling those in exile that God will come for them and bring them back to Jerusalem. We should understand that the return of people from exile does not normally happen. Israel in exile is in the control of the mightiest ruler on earth, and it would take a far greater and more powerful force to set them free and bring them back to the land of promise than is found in any of the kingdoms of earth. The impossible would have to occur. Yet that is what Isaiah is telling Israel: God is coming. We know the outcome of Isaiah's prophecy. The people of Jerusalem return from Babylon without a fight, revolt, uprising, or battle. The mighty hand of God turns the heart of the king of Babylon from his limited power to the understanding of the

power of the true God and, as a consequence, the people of Israel are released from their exile, from bondage and cruel circumstances, and allowed to return to Jerusalem. The unthinkable occurs for Israel; God comes and with His mighty arm again frees Israel from bondage to worship Him.

God is at work today, right here, right now, in this place, seeking to set us free from our bondage to sin. The mighty arm of God is raised and fights for us to be released from our own exile, our own separation from Him. God is speaking tenderly to us, to all of His people, to prepare our hearts that he might come to us. The mighty arm of God as a ruler with all authority comes as a child born in a manger. The humble birth of Jesus brings to us the gentleness and kindness of Jesus, who like a shepherd will feed his flock and gather the lambs in his powerful arms that defeat all foes, even sin and death. And this shepherd of God then carries his lambs and gently leads the mother sheep. God comes in an unexpected manner to speak tenderly to His people, to bring them grace and to comfort them. God comes as a child wrapped in strips of cloths lying in a manger to be our savior, to stretch out his mighty arms on a cross and die for us that he might bring us into the kingdom of God.

In the Advent season, our desire, our hunger, should become that our own hearts would become prepared so that God will come to our hearts, fresh, new, fully, and in glory. How do we prepare our hearts? Start with the easy things. Decorate your home for Christmas. Seek to surround ourselves with reminders of Jesus' coming in the flesh. Next, encourage each other in love. Seek to find new ways to love those we meet and to encourage one another to open our hearts through love of others. Then turn to the idea of repentance that Isaiah and John the Baptist, the soon to be added character to our nativity displays, so clearly spoke to the people. Add repentance to our list of Christmas preparations. Make time to reflect on our lives, seeking to identify our need for repentance. I am not encouraging us to seek to beat ourselves down for every time we have tried to live as God has asked us and failed. The connection we should be seeking here is the connection of joy and repentance. The recent outpouring of God at Asbury University stressed this connection. People who came and encountered the presence of Jesus found great joy in the opportunity to repent that was being extended to them. Jesus takes joy in our repentance and Jesus takes joy in forgiving us. We are being called by God who speaks tenderly to us. Before us is the steadfast love of God, the God who comes, who enters into our world that we may receive the good tidings of "Here is our God!" God is waiting for us to turn to

him. God is waiting for us to prepare a path into our souls so that Jesus might not come just to a manger as a child but as God into our repentant hearts and then transform us from within into his people. Repentance should not bring to mind sadness, pain, and failure. Repentance should bring to our minds joy at having a shepherd who will feed us, who will take us in his mighty arms and carry us in his bosom. Repentance is for us to seek to make a highway in the desert of our souls for our God to come. As the speaker in Isaiah speaks tenderly to Jerusalem, so also Jesus comes and speaks tenderly to us that he might take us from our exile from God because of our sin into the kingdom of God. For most of us this is not our first Advent, Christmas, or Epiphany. We know Jesus has come. Our cry in the season of Advent is not so much, “Come, Lord Jesus, come,” but “Jesus has come!” We should be looking for Jesus’ second coming, but our focus in this season is also on the coming of God as a child in a manger to gather his lambs in his mighty arms and carry them in his bosom. So, stop somewhere in the preparations we undertake for Christmas and spend time before God with a heart that is open to our need for repentance, and open our hearts to the coming of God as a child who will love us with steadfast love, who will speak tenderly to us and gently lead us to repent and to the joy that comes with a glimpse of the glory of a risen savior born in a manger.

Pray with me: Father God, speak tenderly to us, your people. Send Holy Spirit to convict us of our need for repentance and lead us to repent. Help us to prepare our hearts as a highway for our God. Jesus, lead us into the joy of coming before you in repentance. Let us grasp more deeply how you wait to gather us in your arms and carry us in your bosom out of our exile, an exile of our own making. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Listen for Jesus’ tender words calling us to repent in joy and then go out into Jesus’ mission to love all others. Amen

ⁱ Oswalt, John N.. The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition