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## Advent 3 Series B 2017

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## **Advent II – December 10**

Mark is in such a rush. We are more used to the stately entrances of the other Gospel authors. John's prologue, Matthew and Luke's infancy narratives all set the stage for us. Mark simply leaps into the story. He takes all of 8 verses today to bring us the story of John the Baptist. In two more Jesus will be baptized, and three after that has the temptation narrative summed by. What Luke takes three chapters to accomplish; Mark has done in 13 verses!

That said, Mark's Gospel account has a pointed call to repent and sweet words of comfort for our people today. How shall we proclaim that?

Today the Baptist, compared to Isaiah, whose words form the OT lesson, exhorts us to repent. It is worth considering our preaching of repentance as we consider these two potent texts. Our Lutheran theology is very much based on Luther's forensic model of Justification. The forensic model compares our situation to a guilty person appearing in court and having the judge declare us innocent. We had committed the crime (sin) but the judge has stood in our place (Jesus) and taken the punishment for us (the cross.)

I firmly believe that this model continues to have traction in our society and provides a great way to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. But Orthodox, Roman Catholic and other Christians suggest that a monochromatic use of the Justification metaphor is deficient and I would tend to agree with them. While complacency is a perversion of the metaphor, too often the proclamation of forensic justification leaves the Christian whom God has declared righteous in his or her old sins, still committing them, practically unchanged. It does not understand the ongoing, relational aspect of penitence and forgiveness as life transformative process. Another way to think of it is that heaven is a perfect place, and if I am going to belong in heaven, God will have to do some serious reshaping and remolding of my life between baptism and resurrection. This is the thinking that lies behind the Catholic understanding of Purgatory which even C. S. Lewis seems to have considered a possibility.

Paul hints at this transformation in one of my favorite verses in Philippians 1:6 – The good work which God has begun in us he shall bring to completion in the day of Christ. Paul seems to see us in a process which has a generally upward direction and in which God is actively engaged in the betterment of our lives. The NT regularly enjoins the audience to see their troubles, even persecution, as God's loving, fatherly discipline. Lutheran forensic justification warns us against measuring God's love by our lives, but if we fall off on the other side of the horse, we deny the regenerative power of God's love.

As we proclaim repentance this year, again, how will we call our already forgiven and redeemed congregants, most of whom, if not all of whom, are already the children of God to lives which increasingly reflect the face and love of Christ? We are not doing this so that they make one step closer to deserving heaven. This is not works righteousness. And yet it is one step closer to manifesting the heavenly being, the righteous new man, whom God created in our baptism, and whom God brings to heaven's joy. This is repentance of a different sort, a non-forensic sort. This is not the repentance of the man who is out of relationship with God, but the child of God who grieves over a life of sin. The writers of our Formula of Concord were struggling with these very issues. I would commend to you the opening articles of the Epitome as a good place for a theologian to start.

## Collect of the Day

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Stir up our hearts. Last week we prayed for God's power to be stirred up and that sounded a little dangerous. But this week we pray for our hearts to be stirred up. You might think differently about this, but for my part I am not usually glad to have my hearts stirred up. It usually means that I am under some stress, something is bothering me, something is not right. I much prefer that state of a calm heart, peaceful and serene. (I don't actually get to feel that very often, most of the time I am just anxious!)*

*The sorts of things that stir up my heart, however, are quite often very unpleasant. My heart gets stirred up when I see disturbing images. Have you seen the images coming out of Iraq and Syria? Have you seen the pictures of mass shootings or refugees huddled in dismal camps? Perhaps the image of the gaunt, starving, dying children in eastern Africa haunts you. Perhaps your heart stirring is much more personal; it might be a personal tragedy: the photo of your deceased child. It might be something much smaller: the neighbor who backed over your favorite rose bush, or your obnoxious brother-in-law who is showing up for the holidays.*

*My heart gets stirred up when things that I love are threatened or when something for which I have worked very hard is undone. I am too often stirred up in my heart when people speak ill of me or those of whom I love. My heart is riled when I am confronted by evil. We can be stirred up when we are confronted by people's brokenness, relationships gone awry, depression, mental illness. Sometimes we see the crushing poverty of folks and wonder how such things can exist in a nation that is so wealthy?*

*Sometimes God brings things up into our lives which stir us up and we experience some anxiety. Does this in fact cause us to turn to God? Is this God really preparing us for his Peace? Is this prayer perhaps the wise Christian trustingly asking God to stir up my life so I won't be complacent about my sin?*

*Advent always has an element that makes us uneasy. It should make us feel queasy about the situation. Madison Avenue will tell us that the answer to our angst is a larger flat screen television or something like that. Our task as preachers will frequently be to proclaim the opposite. We need to be ready to proclaim that real peace is not found in the amassing of more stuff, but in the service, the giving, and the sacrifice of self for others.*

*Just what are we praying for here? Shall we be stirred up at the sight of our own sins? Shall we be stirred into some sort of action of repentance? That might not be a bad idea. Perhaps we should be stirred into some action, feeding the hungry and taking care of the helpless, or some other good deed. Perhaps we should be stirred up to defend the truth of the Gospel against its foes. Luther wrote some great hymns about that.*

*What are praying for here? I think it could actually be all of those things and the preacher may have some considerable options in this. I once read an Easter sermon which proclaimed that the man or woman who believes words "He is Risen" should either be standing on the pew shouting Hallelujah or cowering in fear under them. Blandly sitting there and mumbling the words of a hymn or two were not really on his radar screen as possible options in that situation. Only unbelief could not be moved. Some passion would be a good thing.*

*Another famous illustration is told of a preacher in India who was confronted by a Hindu holy man who berated him for talking about sin. "I do not feel these sins of which you speak," said the holy man. The preacher looked around and saw a massive stone block in a building nearby. He pointed to that block and said, "Take that stone right there, does it weigh a great deal?" "Of course," said the holy man. "Lay it on a corpse, does it feel it." "Of course not," said the holy man. The preacher continued, "The fact that you do not feel the weight does not mean it is not there"*

*A heart stirred often begins its rustlings with the perception of its own great sins. But that is not the end of the stirring. Sinful hearts who have also perceived the touch of Christ in Baptism and Supper, in preaching and absolution are also stirred by those things to new lives of joyful love and service to the folks around them. The great institutions of learning, hospitals, homeless shelters, and many such things are each a testimony to a lot of hearts stirred up.*

*There is another heart stirring which the preacher will need to keep in mind. Excitement might be another way to speak of being stirred here. The guys in the class thought that their hearts were stirred when they saw the Gospel taking hold in a human being. They were stirred up when they saw something they preached actually getting embodied in the people to whom they preached.*

*It might be even simpler than that. The man who sees his beloved walk into the room might also have his heart stirred. The readiness for the king is the goal. But it would seem from a careful read of Scripture that the readiness is not found in the deed accomplished but in the heart engaged in the task. For our Lord does not return to make an inspection of schools and hospitals and churches and homeless shelters built and operated by Christians. He comes to judge the heart. The stirred up heart might be doing all sorts of things, weeping tears of repentance or handing out a coat to a child, or sitting on a committee at Church or teaching a Bible class in her home. Stirred up hearts are all over the map, and Jesus delights in their diversity that way. They are the readiness for the king.*

*The purity of mind in which we then serve is not that we have no sins lurking in there, but that we are forgiven and empowered by the Holy Spirit whom Christ pours out to be his servants in this place. The end of Luther's explanation to the second article of the Creed seems helpful here. Jesus has done all these things so that we may be God's own people and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. This is the pure mind for which we pray in this prayer. For some strange reason, God uses broken vessels like me and you. We are mosaic of shattered people whom he has arranged into a beautiful picture. Our minds as well can be at peace, for his Word has spoken and we are His. Our hearts have been stirred, we are no longer content with the way the world is. His gracious act has made us uncomfortable with the status quo. We cannot find a happiness in the things of this world or the comforts of wealth. Family and work, health and the rest of the blessings we have been given by God and for which have given thanks on Thanksgiving Day are never able to completely satisfy us. Until our hearts rest in God they are always restless.*

*The word coming also deserves a little attention here: it is a participle – present. The coming of Christ via word and sacrament is a today thing which enables us to serve with the pure mind. We preach the real presence and not the real absence of Christ. The preparation of his way is not something we do while he waits up in heaven for us to get it done, the preparation is something that he gives to us and he works in us even now.*

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to 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.

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

<sup>6</sup> A voice says, “Cry!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All flesh is grass,  
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades  
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;  
surely the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup> Go on 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!”

<sup>10</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.

<sup>11</sup> He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young.

*This may be one of the most complex pieces of the Old Testament. I don't mean to discourage you with that. This is not inaccessibly complex and there is some absolutely marvelous stuff in here, but don't think you can preach this whole text on Sunday. It simply cannot be done in a week or even a month of Sundays. But there is also enough glorious Gospel in this for a month of Sundays as well. The preacher who struggles a bit with this text will be richly rewarded.*

*Part of our struggle with the text is that we are living in a prosaic age but this is poetry. Poetry requires us to read and think and meditate. If you have not developed these skills yet, this is a good time to start. You cannot speed read the Bible, despite what my students sometimes think. Even the prose sections require us to contemplate what we are reading and close study pays off huge rewards for the preacher.*

*"Comfort, comfort" begins the text. (It sounds a little like that cartoon roman guy who advertises for Little Caesar's, doesn't it? "Pizza, pizza!") The repetition is unusual in the otherwise Spartan Hebrew language. They like parallelism but do not often indulge in this sort of repetition, which should give the interpreter pause. This sort of repetition can be an intensifier. One way the language says "very" is by doubling. Something that is good, good is very good. This could be what is happening here, but I don't actually think so.*

*Comfort, comfort – what comfort? This is not a lazy-boy recliner sort of comfort. The audience which immediately follows dispels that sort of a meaning. The prophet is told to preach this comfort to a penitent people, the citizens of Jerusalem, ripped from their homes by exile and living in a foreign land not of their choosing. It is important for the preacher to remember here that the people to whom Isaiah addresses these words don't need any help getting into a penitential mood. Having most of your family slaughtered by the Babylonians does that to a person. Their hearts are already stirred up that way. The comfort is that their sins are paid for, their iniquity is pardoned, and their warfare has ended. They have received double from the hands of the Lord.*

*Here, in these initial verses, is your first great sermon opportunity in this text. Double what, double punishment in the exile? Was the exile sort of a double whammy for the people? Did they get an especially harsh punishment for their sins, an over punishment of sorts? That works. Or is it that they now have gotten a double response from God, he has punished and now has pardoned their sins? Or is it the first words returning at the end of verse two? Is it a double dose of comfort, hence "comfort, comfort." You could easily comfort, comfort your people for a whole sermon just picking that apart. Do a word study on the Hebrew word "comfort" and you will have a lot of fun with that. See where it shows up.*

*Verses 3-8, the part that intersects most explicitly with the Gospel reading, are the grammarian's nightmare. Hebrew, you must understand, has no punctuation. The closest it gets is an interrogative "he" (the letter 'h') which shows up sometimes when the text seems to be asking a question. But even that is not standard by any means.*

*The first part introduces a voice crying out. Our editors have understood these verses to be the content of what the voice cries in the wilderness. But it could also be a description of what happens when the voice cries in the wilderness instead of a prescription. The calls for repentance in verse 3. Verses 4-5 could describe that repentance.*

*One really has to ignore all the punctuation in these verses, or at least recognize that the punctuation is a form of interpretation in itself. Just look at verse 3: A voice crying in the wilderness prepare the path for*

the LORD. *Does that mean we should straighten a path which runs through a wilderness or is the voice out in the wilderness? Depending on where you put the quotes and the commas, it will determine which one you think it to be. Clearly the editor of our text thought the preparation is out in the wilderness, but John the Baptist and the Gospel writers all take this to mean that John's preaching in fulfillment of this text takes place out in the wilderness. They see the voice out there. (But what do they know, they are only inspired.)*

*This only gets worse when you come down to verse 6-8: Voice says cry and I said what shall I cry all flesh is like grass and its beauty like the flower of the field Again, depending on where you put the quotes, you interpret the text significantly. The voice says, "Cry out" and I said, "What shall I cry?" that much is pretty clear. The real question is what you do with the next part. Who speaks the lines about all flesh is like grass? Is it God responding to the prophet, telling him what to say? Is it the part about the transitory nature of humanity the content of what he is supposed to cry out? That doesn't sound very comforting. Or do these words belong to the prophet? Is this the cynical continuation of the prophet after his question? Is he just so exasperated with all the crying out that he has done to no avail?*

*The following verse complicates things even more. Is this the response of the voice to the cynical prophet? "yes the people are like grass and the grass withers and the flowers fade when the breath of the Lord blows on them but the word of the Lord stands forever" or does the response of the voice begin at "surely" in the third line of this verse? Is it a continuation of the content which the prophet is supposed to cry out? Could it be the poetic form repeating the comfort, comfort of above? We are like grass but God's Word stands forever. This offers all sorts of sermons to preach, all of them faithful to the text but would need to be backed up with another clearer passage from scripture and should be handled with considerable care. Don't over state it, the grammar just won't support you too far on this.*

*The last section might be more fruitful, the herald is sent up to a high mountain. I think we would put him on satellite TV today. He is to broadcast as far as he can shout that God is coming. He brings his recompense and reward with him and there is a whole sermon in that line too. Then in a complete metaphor switch, God is depicted as a gentle shepherd, gathering the sheep, carrying the lambs in his arms and taking care to lead the ewes with lambs. Any preacher should be able to go to town on that one.*

*What is the preacher to do with all this? I think you have to figure out what your people need to hear and then pick the part out of this that is most appropriate for them. Here the preacher actually has a great deal of leeway. Even the authors of Scripture take some liberties in interpreting these words of Isaiah. It appears this is a classic locus for "multiple literal meanings" of the text. The Gospel reading picks up on that grammatically challenging part in the middle, so if you want to connect them, you will have to work a little on that.*

## Psalm 85

LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup> You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin. Selah

<sup>3</sup> You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.

- <sup>4</sup> Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!
- <sup>5</sup> Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
- <sup>6</sup> Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?
- <sup>7</sup> Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;  
but let them not turn back to folly.
- <sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.
- <sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
- <sup>11</sup> Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.
- <sup>12</sup> Yes, the LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- <sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him  
and make his footsteps a way.

*This is an amazing bit of OT poetry. Alas, as noted above, we live in an age when poetry is not read. We love our prose. We want our information, quickly, concisely, and straight up. We don't have time to tarry over a few words beautifully written, on irony, or metaphor.*

*In verses 1-3 the Psalm opens with the psalmist remembering the forgiveness and patience God has shown to those who went before, probably remembering the many times God threatened to destroy the Israelites in the days of the Exodus but relented. Now, in verses 4-7, the Psalmist feels that he and his people are under the same wrath and judgment of God. He appeals for that forgiving God to relent and once more have mercy upon them.*

*In verses 8-9 the Psalmist expresses confident hope. He will hear the good news of God's mercy.*

*It is verses 10-13 which deserve our close attention. Love and faithfulness meet, right-ness and peace kiss each other. Righteousness or right-ness can hardly kiss peace – for righteousness must make war against the sinfulness of the world. The holiness and perfection of God cannot tolerate the sin of this world, but the Psalmist sees a way out. The righteousness of God and shalom (peace) shall kiss. This will be the Lord's giving and the land will benefit. He will cause righteousness to go before him and his footsteps will become the way.*

*By now you should be guessing where this is going. The first Christians were known as followers of "The Way." Jesus even refers to himself this way. God's gift of himself is the way out of the conundrum. In Christ the righteousness of God and true peace for all creation kiss as he takes up a sinful creation to his holy being and rather than consuming the creation graciously bestows his holiness on the creation.*

II Peter 3:8-14

<sup>8</sup> But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

<sup>11</sup> Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! <sup>13</sup> But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. <sup>15</sup> *And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,* <sup>16</sup> *as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.* <sup>17</sup> *You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.* <sup>18</sup> *But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

*These are the final words of Peter's second letter and so I gave you the rest of the chapter to the end. He makes a very interesting statement about Paul's letters which many of my students would say is accurate. They are hard to understand. And indeed, ignorant and unstable people do twist the words of the Bible to their own destruction. But our attention is actually drawn to the earlier section which we will be reading.*

*Here we find a familiar quote from Scripture which most of your folks probably know. The old thousand years are like a day thing. Peter sees the dissolution of the heaven and the earth in fire and that ought to inspire us to lives of holy living. That in itself does not encourage such holy living, but in verse 13 he gets to the real motive. We have a promise from God, a new heaven and a new earth.*

*Here is a great place to intersect with the fears and the trepidations of our people. The apocalyptic prophets of this day and age are all proclaiming the end of the world. But this is not a divine judgment, it is the consequence of our own stupidity. We are gassing ourselves, heating up the planet, melting the ice caps and drowning all the polar bears. The fish stocks are plummeting and soon the only thing prospering in the environment will be the toxic algae blooms in the polluted oceans. There are a lot of people pushing a lot of fear in this regard.*

*The environmentalist can only find salvation in recycling and renewable energy sources. If that doesn't work, we will have to start eliminating the problem, which is humanity. The fellow who wrote the 1970's book on the population explosion just came out of retirement to pen another one about how we are reproducing ourselves to death and he has some rather pointed solutions I understand. Apparently the world would be better off if most of us were simply re-entering the food chain as compost.*

*But the Christian is moved to a holy life for another reason than raw, or worse, ambiguous fear. The salvation of this planet does not rest entirely on my shoulders, that is a burden I am not able to bear, no one is, except the One. I read a really interesting and at times provocative book recently entitled, "The World is Not Yours To Save" whose title just about says it all. The author is named Tyler Wiggs-*

*Stephenson. He is not a Lutheran but tells a story in there about a Lutheran man which you really want to read. It is really well done.*

*But back to the text: We live holy lives, recycling our plastics and cutting down on our consumables because we know the one who made this world and loves this world and who will one day come to right all its wrongs. The new heaven and earth in which the righteous dwell are his gift and not our earned reward. So, waiting for these things, we are diligent in our lives, living at peace with one another and the world around us. Not because we like all that we see or are content with the way that it is, but because we know that our real peace lies with Him. This all will come to nothing. But he makes from nothing. Having that burden removed from our shoulders actually makes us better recyclers, I believe. Freed in Christ to serve him and one another and empowered by his Holy Spirit, without the drive of some return on his investment, makes us more diligent in caring for our world, one another, and the rest of creation.*

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way,

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup> John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

*So what is the Gospel that begins here? Is it not of course the good news that Jesus has come. It might work to think about this in terms of the II Peter text above. The world, rebellious and sinful destined for the great incinerator. God as the creator has every right to destroy it. It is his, after all. But what he did was send his only Son into the flesh so that those who believe in Jesus would be able to transcend this world and that destruction and live in the new heaven and earth of which Peter writes.*

*What is repentance? Mark uses it in this text and so does Peter above. The people of God will be well served if the preacher in their pulpit can articulate something about this word. Many think of repentance as the thing we do and to which God reacts and therefore forgives us. But this is not what the Bible has in mind and this seems to be a sort of works-righteousness. Repentance means something else. To repent is a divine act. It is God working penitence in us. Repentance is the honest appraisal of my need and the realization that God has done something about this. Repentance is living out of that new reality, confessing that the old way is broken and contrary to God's will.*

*Mark's Gospel has no birth stories. It just leaps right into the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Jesus strides into this story and rushes about as a full grown man. It is not that Mark denies the childhood of Jesus, but he just doesn't talk about it. He connects the beginning of the story to the Old Testament with a quote from Old Testament, in part from the very passage we are hearing earlier in the service, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Before it, however, he also appends a few lines from Malachi 3 about the messenger who will go before.*

*All this is to introduce John, the preacher of repentance and the last of the OT prophets. All four of the Gospels include a section on John, in each of the Gospel accounts John is clearly shown to be playing a supportive role for Jesus. Many have thought that this was necessary because the John movement in the first century was considerable. The Christians would have seen a natural affinity in the disciples of John and seem to have been trying to reach out to them, but also to put John's ministry in its place within the larger picture of Christ and his ministry. Perhaps this was also to prevent their own readers from being tempted to join the John crowd. We don't know much about this movement. They have left us no written record and so we must read passages like this and guess. We don't really know what was going on in their heads, but it is striking that all four of the Gospel writers include a section on John like this and all of them include John's assertion that Jesus is greater than he is. It would seem that it was necessary thing to say in the first century. Acts also records that Paul ran into some who were followers of John, but he baptized them with the baptism of Christ, apparently because John's baptism was not the same sort of baptism. (See Acts 18:24-19:7. Also see Acts 13:24-25 for an example of Paul's preaching which carefully notes John's subordinate character.)*

*Of course, most of our people, especially those who are not regular Bible study junkies like ourselves, hardly know who John is. Advent has been so marginalized by the society that there is little room for the prophet of repentance between the Christmas shopping and the guilt-driven appeals for the food banks and Salvation Army bell ringers. We know something is not right and we desperately hope that chucking a few dollars in that red pot hanging outside the store will legitimize the hundreds of dollars we spend inside. John articulates that feeling for us and will not let us off the hook so easily*

*Mark's account is exceptionally brief at this point, like much of his book. The whole countryside is coming out to see him. His ministry and preaching start a vast movement, however brief. We know that the Jews did practice baptism; Mark will later tell us that the Pharisees even advocated baptizing vessels and even their couches! (Mark 7:4 BTW, in a completely American comment, I have always thought this suggested that they did not understand baptism to involve a complete immersion – I cannot imagine immersing whole pieces of furniture, and I seriously doubt if the couch had made a decision for God at that point.) What does seem to be different about John is that he is baptizing Jews. The Jews seem to have baptized gentile converts, but not the children of Abraham by birth. But we also know that the Essene community such as at Qumran did have ritual washings. The dissolution of the community may have been occasioned by an earthquake which cracked their ritual cleansing pools.*

*John is the archetypal Old Testament prophet, styled on the wild man Elijah. He wore wild clothes and ate the diet of a Nazarene, the wild honey and locusts were actually more Kosher than what you would get in town. Of course all this is designed to remind of the passage in Malachi 3 and 4 which spoke of the messenger who is Elijah returned, who would go before the Lord himself. We get the description of Elijah's clothing in II Kings 1:1-8 if you are interested.*

*And John's words are designed to further that idea and it is those words today which probably will occupy us. One is coming later whose sandals John is not worthy to lace. I cannot footnote this, and should really look it up, but did not. I heard that in the first century a disciple of a Rabbi was often a personal servant of sorts, but there were certain duties which a rabbi could not ask a disciple to do. One of them was to unlace and carry his sandals. Even to this day, sandals, shoes, and boots are considered particularly unclean in this part of the world. US soldiers in Iraq had to be schooled not to cross their legs and point the sole of their shoe at someone. It is considered a great offence in Arab cultures still. When you realize that the sewers are all open and the stuff running down the street is pretty nasty, you can appreciate why. This is also why if you go a Christian church in India or to the Taj Mahal, a Muslim mosque, you will be asked to remove your shoes.*

*So John is saying that he is not even worthy to do the job that is beneath a disciple. That is pretty far down the social scale. And the difference is particularly acute in the effects of what they are out there doing. While John baptizes with water the one who comes after him baptizes with the Holy Spirit. That seems like a pretty significant difference and one reason that Christian preachers need to be careful about the way they talk about John's baptism. It is not the same as a Christian baptism. (I have always thought it odd that some parishes reserve the sacrament of baptism for the "Baptism of our Lord" which falls right after Epiphany.)*

*But what is this text really about for the reader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? God makes ready the way for Jesus could be one answer. How does that play out today? Is he still making ready the way, where does that happen, how does it happen. I don't see John out there preaching. The Eastern Orthodox have a much stronger emphasis on John than we do. In the front of their churches is always an icon of the Madonna with the Christ child on the left of the altar as you face it. On the right is another icon of the Baptist pointing across the entrance to the altar area toward the Christ child. You see that everywhere you go in an Orthodox church. What would that look like for us? Do we remember the Baptist when we preach repentance? Do we preach repentance?*

*The preacher will want to ask who or what is John today? Who proclaims a message of repentance that has any traction? And if there is no one who preaches repentance, how can the way be prepared for our proclamation of the Gospel? For without John, without the Law's brutal call, the ground is not prepared, the Gospel has no tilled soil in which to take root. Calvinism has historically leapt past this point too easily and gone for a third use of the law sort of preaching. Once the revival has taken place, the purpose of preaching in that tradition has often been therapeutic. Lutherans have a strong tradition of preaching repentance, but how can we do it well when most of our people hear it through the lens of revival and look for preaching which would "guide" their lives.*

*Repentance has never been easy to preach. Two thousand years ago John plugged into his culture in a way which resonated with the people of his day. Perhaps they were ready for that in a way we are not. But I wonder if people today are not just as angst ridden as they were. Are we coming to a moment when the idols of modernity are proving themselves to be feckless and unreliable?*

*Young people in particular seem once more to be questioning the sincerity and authenticity of those who have preceded them. Ironically, the object of their scorn are the very Baby Boomers who rebelled in the 1960's. Do they articulate a problem which most people cannot answer? Are the problems we are facing fundamentally not economic, political, etc.? Are they actually spiritual problems? Do we work so hard at health care lest we face death? Is in fact John hitting pretty hard the people of our day? Is it the*

*loneliness of the folks in this community really a spiritual problem? Do we need to speak to these things with the Holy Spirit filled solution of God? We will have to do this humbly. We are not the solution, Jesus is the solution. But we proclaim Jesus.*

*We would never dare to say to a hungry man that his hunger is a spiritual problem. But the answer to his hunger is not going to happen because we jiggle the economic system or the political system. The answer to his hunger is when we answer the spiritual problem in other people, not him, in all folks. It is when we answer that deep spiritual hunger in the folks who walk by the homeless man that he will be fed. The spiritual answer results in real food for the hungry. The Spiritual answer results in real relief for the suffering. This is the valleys raised up, the mountains brought low. This is the repentance in action.*

## **Law**

1. Jesus is not before our eyes. We miss seeing him that way. We have him by faith but sometimes that is very unsatisfactory, especially on the dark days, on the depressing days after Thanksgiving when the family have all gone home and we are here by ourselves. Of course, it might say even worse things about us if we are glad to see the family depart.
2. Our loneliness gets compounded when we take a look outside our windows and consider what is out there. The world is not a pretty place sometimes. Terrorists spread carnage in Afghanistan and Iraq, thousands lose their jobs, the food-banks are all saying that they are empty and the lines are long. State governments are having to cut programs. We could really use Jesus about now.
3. Even worse is the notion that we look out the window and have gotten used to it. We in the numbness of sin have come to believe that the brokenness of the world around us is the way it always has been and always will be. There is no king coming to fix this. Things will continue to spiral on like this forever. We forget that when we see the stuff spinning round and round most often it is heading toward the sewer.
4. The solutions of mankind seem so transitory. Do you remember LBJ's war on poverty? We have been warring on poverty for the last forty years and it seems to be winning. The problems seem to be real and solid and genuine and the solutions seem so ephemeral or so distant. We really are like grass. We grow old and die and the world is not a better place for our being there.
5. There is much crookedness in our personal lives, our homes, our congregations, and our society. The way for the king seems so far off. The confidence of prior generations seems to have evaporated. Where are the saints who sent the missionaries and built the hospitals and erected the cathedrals? We struggle to get our own kids in church and grieve that the retention rate for Lutheran confirmands is pathetically low, 7% in the northwest by one study I read. Our churches often seem listless and without direction. No one is excited about what we are doing; they are tolerant, but not excited.
6. John's message to me of "repent" seems like it is directed to someone else. Repentance is a generally approved of thing, but it seems that others should be doing the repenting. But John's words are sharp and to the point. The one who comes is powerful and great – we are not ready. Repentance is realizing that we need Jesus – we have too often thought that we were on the right track, expecting God to come and pat us on the head.

## **Gospel**

1. Jesus is Emmanuel – his presence is real and not imagined. His hiddenness behind the elements of sacraments and the people of service is not a diminution of his presence, but a strengthening of his presence. Jesus himself will say that we are more blessed than those who saw him (see John 20)
2. The problems we see in our own hearts and in our own lives as well as those in our homes, congregations, and the world at large are all on Jesus agenda. These are the things for which he was born in that manger and for which he bore that cross of Calvary's cruel slope.
3. Thus Jesus is also awakening in us the disconcerting realization that we are broken. He opens eyes and stirs up our hearts. No longer are we left numb. At first this hurts, and it is no fun, but it is also a sign of very good news. Our expectations have been raised, our eyes have been opened. It is better to see than be blind; even if our first glimpse of ourselves is that we need a shower and a shave. Soon we will be able to see his marvelous salvation brought to its completion as we are all given to see Jesus as he really is.
4. The world is a much better place for the work he has done through those transitory men and women who have gone before us. He continues to care for the poor and the hungry and the weak. He delights when the government does something good, but he is not counting on it and the Christian cannot think that it has removed that love from us when we have paid our taxes. Jesus love flows through us too, to the unbeliever who hears from us as well as to the child who is cared for or the little old woman whose leaves the youth rake up and cart off.
5. The crookedness of our lives is a genuine problem, but it is a problem for which God has the solution in Christ. He has come, Baptized with that Holy Spirit and now we are the redeemed and precious children of God once more. The call this day is not to lament the problems but to rejoice in the solutions. That will in the long run prove far more attractive to our own children and infuses life and liveliness into the moribund corners of God's kingdom.
6. And so the good news is "repent" today. Christ has given us to see this world in all its brokenness, made sharper by the contrast with his holiness. We are blessed to see the holiness and that does change the way we see the world, but it also calls us to his side and gives us the promise of his salvation.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. Making the path ready for the king – (OT and Gospel: That the hearer would believe that God is mightily at work to prepare the way for Christ through his/her life, spurring us on to repent, reform, and act in His kingdom.)

The kingdom of God is not found in the buildings of Christendom, the great cathedrals, the humble parish churches, the hospitals or universities or any other sort of place. The kingdom of God is found in his people, in the hearts who have been touched by Jesus and who have been set on fire by His Holy Spirit. Oddly enough God lit that fire with water applied to your head, perhaps many years ago. He has tended it and continues to feed its flame with Word and Sacrament.

The judgment of the last day is not an inspection of our buildings, but our hearts. Today Isaiah's words and John's exhortation give us occasion to repent, to consider and look at the parts of our

being that are not up to heaven's high standard. But it also gives us occasion to believe and have a firm expectation in God. For Christ has come and called us to belong in that heavenly realm. He has written our names in the book of life and we are his handiwork. It is the sins of our lives that will pass away, buried in hell's grave, but we shall endure on that day. It is the new man, the redeemed, the holy, the perfect, who will be stripped of all that is wrong and stand on that last day before him, joyful, perfect in every way, and fit for heaven.

God works mighty deeds in us today. The work of saving is done. Jesus has seen to that. But today he is with us working to bring our lives into conformity with that to which he has called us and which he has established in our baptisms. He brings us toward his perfection. Advent reminds us that our old sinful nature is out of step with his heavenly realm, it is at odds with Jesus' kingdom of love and peace. It is not who we really are.

The preacher will need to develop this and the sermon has cast it as a kingdom or citizenship. This is faithful to the text in that both Isaiah and John were proclaiming to God's people in a context of foreign occupation. They were ruled by an emperor from a distant land who did not listen to the voice of the Lord. That created a sense of dissonance for them. All Christians have a similar experience in this life. We live in both kingdoms or, to use Paul's imagery, are both old and a new man simultaneously. God is at work nurturing and feeding and bringing into being that new man. Through daily repentance and contrition the old man is put to death that God may bring forth the new man through our baptism. It may be slow and painful, but it is the direction we are headed as he brings into reality that kingdom of Christ in our lives.

2. The Word of the Lord Stands Forever (OT/Psalm: That the hearer would take hope and comfort in the sweet Word who is Christ and who has called him/her holy in baptism, absolution, sacrament and the fellowship of the believers.)

As early as 1522, Luther's protector, Frederick the Wise, had his whole household put a logo on their garments – VDMA, usually with the letter located in the four quadrants of a cross. (See the image on the right.) The letters stand for Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternam – the Word of the Lord Endures Forever. His successors and many Lutherans ever since have used this logo. (You can read more at: <https://lutheranreformation.org/history/the-motto-of-the-reformation/> )



All flesh is indeed like the grass. The multitudes flocked out to see John and look what happened. They did not really listen. Jesus will accuse them of that in Holy Week. Indeed to trust in a man is foolhardy, as the psalmist knows so well. But Isaiah and the Psalmist today count on the Word of God, yearning to listen to his voice. For in the word of God, Righteousness and Peace come together and kiss. The righteous demands of God, the holiness which is his very nature have brought peace to me and you.

This sermon will want to tap into the angst which many folks feel today. We spend and spend, but we do not have happiness. We have spent ourselves into debt, and now we are paying the price and it seems like we will never get out of that. If we look to government for help, we are disappointed as it seems powerless, wracked by division and without the resources to meet the

challenges of the day. The social structures which seemed to make prior generations safe, prosperous, and dynamic are hollow and empty shells of what they once were. We have replaced stable marriages with single parenthood. We have swapped out the communities which gathered around the high school football fields and gymnasiums for a bunch of self-indulgent, narcissists whose idea of fostering community involves fine tuning their Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and Instagram messages.

But while in our darker moments we contemplate a world which often appears to be heading to hell's fires in the flimsy conveyance of a wicker hand basket, there is something which has not changed. God's Word, including the words of promise spoken in our baptism, sacrament, absolution, and Bibles stands. What it says does not change. Sinners die. Jesus has done something about that. We will not stay dead, but live in heaven, sinless and forever.

One might illustrate this with the apparent tension of a holy life which has run its course. The Christian faith in the resurrection is potent. Best if you can think of someone in your own congregation, but a hearty saint of old might work too. The redeemed of the Lord go through all the stages of life, including aging, failing senses, perhaps even senility. But that is not the end of the story. The love which God poured into the world, and which we can see reflected in their earthly lives will last forever. God will see this life which he engendered in baptism and sustained through Word and Sacrament, remember it, and delight it in it on the last day. That life which looks to be moldering in a grave somewhere shall once more live in exuberant joy.

3. Comfort, Comfort! (OT and Gospel: That the hearer would receive double from the hand of the Lord – a double measure of forgiveness and love to meet the challenges of this day with grace and joy.)

Isaiah's strange formulation suggests the very structure of this sermon. The preacher will want to take the hearer on a little voyage of exploration with this sermon. It is such an interesting picture. If you have a projector you might just paste in a little clip of the silly Little Caesar's animated spokesman who says, "Pizza! Pizza!". What is comfort, comfort? We know what "pizza, pizza" is, or at least the ad campaign assumes we do. But what is "comfort, comfort"?

The preacher will want to posit that this is essential for us. You might compare it to the singular as the real thing and the fake. Comfort is great, but comfort comfort is better. Comfort might be what we experience in the transitory sense of sitting in a comfortable chair, but comfort, comfort is when God deals with our sins, giving us a double measure.

Of course the law development here is if we start to think of what our sins deserve and doubling that. That could be frightening. But God does not say, "punish, punish!" He says the double measure for sins is "comfort, comfort."

Which of course will have us segue into the Gospel lesson. The OT prophetic witness, summarized in John, could only prepare for the comfort, comfort. It was not the very double comfort itself. John baptized with water alone. He recognizes the need for God's action here. His action is not enough. The solution to this problem will take God's strange, otherworldly action. Jesus baptizes with the Spirit. The human being cannot really even repent of his own, that will take God. He lavishes his love on us. First he confronts us and leads us away from death and sin. Here might be the first comfort. But then the second comfort might be that he does not simply

bring us to a void, free of sin, but he bestows the very right-ness of God. This second comfort, the life of Christ lived in my place, is the double. God does not merely remove my sin, but he gives me the very goodness which I am incapable of living, even if I try very hard and grit my teeth. I just cannot do it.

The double comfort is God's gift of both His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit. You might run with that. You might also preach that the death of God's only son on a cross, and the Spirit poured out are simply double payment for a whole world of sin. In the economy of God's righteousness, he has paid the sinners debt twice over. It's like having your mortgage paid off and that much more deposited into your bank account.

What then does it mean to be a "comfort, comfort" person in this world? All around us there are people who are being chewed up and spit out by the economy, the politics, the health, the divisive society, the poverty, you name it. Too often we think that means we need to tell them their sins. The reality is they are likely well aware of the fact that they have a problem. They need to hear of God's solution. The world has said that these are economic, political, physical problems, but being a comfort comfort person means we recognize that at the root of all these issues is a spiritual problem, a spiritual problem I share as a human being, a problem which God has comforted in my life.

That means to be a comfort comfort person in the world means I no longer am complacent about the ills of the world which don't directly affect me. They stir up my heart, to speak in the language of the collect. That may stir me to action.

The man who is comfortable walks by a hungry man. I am OK, and I thank God that I am not there. But the hungry man needs a sandwich, not a sermon. As a comfort comfort person I might just give him a sandwich. God has taken care of me, but he pushes me out of my comfort zone, and this is the second comfort. This second comfort often gives me the great reward of stepping out of my own singular comfort. I have the ability to share. God releases me in this comfort to be such a servant and an encourager of others. I have a double measure. I can experience joy as I am now part of Christ's solution to this world's problems. I am not the one who bears these problems, Jesus bears them, but he puts me here to be his hands and feet in this little spot. This is privilege, not obligation. Can we preach that without messing it up?

But the comfort comfort person is also not a "Punish, Punish" person. I don't need to settle scores. I am freed of this. Jesus on the cross has not only freed me from the tyranny of my sins and their punishment, he has also freed me from the tyranny of my virtue. I am able to be humble before these problems.

4. The Mighty One comes to tend his flock (OT That the hearer would look for the unexpected Lord Jesus who comes in power but who tends the flock gently)

This sermon wants the hearer to listen to the promise and the threat of the OT. God comes in power and that is terrifying to us and well it should be. But Isaiah then veers off to the right on this, the One who comes in power is not smashing and destroying, as we imagine power to do, this Mighty One is tending the flock, bearing the young in his arms and leading those with little ones tenderly.

This contrast will serve as the energy for this sermon. Our expectations, shaped by the world, tell us to fear and dread this coming, but God's promise is wholly other. Jesus has come to shepherd his flock, care for the weak and vulnerable, carrying them in his arms.

The preacher may want to look to pop-culture for the law development here. Our expectation of the end of the world is often very dark. Dystopian science fiction (Blade Runner, Hunger Games, etc.) which only imagines a future which is dark and miserable cannot see through to what Isaiah can see. That takes God's vision. Isaiah looks through the terror and the suffering to hope. Yes God comes in power. That will be a fearful thing. The world and its henchmen should tremble and fear for that day. But they do not own our imagination. God owns our imagination. We are given another vision, a beautiful vision. The One who comes in power and glory, smashing evil and upsetting the plans of our enemies, comes to save and rescue us. The trigger event for the end of the world is not God's wrath. The trigger event for the end of the world is God's compassion for his people. Jesus does not come only angry, he comes angry because his people are at the end of their rope and being crushed by their foes. That's what he comes to fix.

5. Striving for the spotless, blameless life of peace (Epistle – That God would, through Word and Sacrament, sustain faith and engender good works in the believer – a life which is spotless and blameless in Christ and which is at peace with Him and neighbor.)

This sermon would proclaim the good work of God in the life of the hearer. Peter seems to set an impossibly high bar for us to meet. We are to be spotless and blameless, at peace. Who can manage this? I cannot. You cannot. But God does manage it. It is exactly what he does in our baptism and continues to do in our lives through what happens in this place. He works the spotless and blameless life, he establishes peace.

First of all we have to speak to the way we can ever talk about being spotless and blameless. This is not a measure which derives from some empirical examination of my life or yours. This statement comes purely from God. We are passive in this. God makes us pure, spotless, and blameless. That is what Jesus does in cross and resurrection. That is what he did to me and you individually in baptism and supper and absolution.

But declaring us right in Christ also has an effect. It changes the person so made pure and blameless. Having been named as such, that name pulls on us, it attracts us to its truth. The sinners are drawn out of their sin and into the righteousness which has been given to them. We cannot measure this. We must be very clear, our failures and shortcomings in this regard are not failures of God's love for us. But in preaching the pure word of Justification, we cannot simply ignore the truth of the Spirit's work in our lives. He also does this. It is messy and sometimes not clear, but He does do this.

Peter speaks to the goal of our faith and the place to which we are heading, ever since the day of our baptism: Spotless and blameless life of peace. The preacher may want to focus on the end of that phrase. The peace which passes our understanding but which is given us in Christ is a very good thing. The ability to forgive the sinner, not just understand him/her, but to forgive the wretch brings huge peace to our lives. The blessed news that Jesus has redeemed me and calls me a child of God means that my own past can no longer stir me up and disturb that peace. The community which gathers around forgiveness operates in a peace which the world simply cannot understand.

The preacher will want to cast that vision for the hearer. God's love does things to us. This is what it does. This is a beautiful thing.

6. The Beginning and not the End of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's Son (Gospel That the Holy Spirit would challenge the complacency of the hearer and spur us to lives which reflect that Jesus has come and will come again.)

Mark calls his whole book just the beginning of the Gospel. It is not the end – it is still going on. The proclamation of kingdom continues. For the folks in the ancient world, when someone came in with a “kerygma” a message to proclaim, it often was the news that the emperor had died and the reign of a new king had been established. (Often this was some weeks after the events as news traveled slowly.)

Couching his Gospel in these terms, Mark really is suggesting the Gospel is a challenge to the status quo. We don't hear the term “gospel” in that sense much any more. For us it has been domesticated. It is a Church word. But for Mark and the other Gospel writers this word had serious social and political overtones. They were announcing a new king, a new kingdom, a new reign. This challenged the way of the old reign. It was a new value system. The romans were competitive, power-based, and winners. Jesus comes and turns that all on its head. He cares for the poor and weak and small. He welcomes children. He has compassion on widows. The Christian movement of the first century was taking on the established values of the first century Roman Empire.

The fact that we have a hard time seeing this is testimony to the fact that the Gospel won that battle. At least it won it for a while. We are increasingly coming into a time in which it seems the old values of Rome are reasserting themselves. Perhaps they never really went away, but it seems like they are much more prevalent today. Our world is increasingly operating on principles of power, and ego, and sound-bites. It is a kingdom of outrage which thinks a problem needs to be met with tweets and screaming crowds who then go home but never actually talk to the other side. We mask our problems with things, and under it all is a vague uneasiness which we cannot put a finger on, but we hope that if we just get that curved screen HDTV for Christmas, then I will be happy. I shop therefore I am.

To be successful, this sermon will need the urgency of Peter's message. The Church has too often become complacent in our Christianity and forgotten that God has put us here as a light to a benighted world and a challenge to this status quo. We hear these words and yawn. We see the Gospel as an old thing (days of Jesus) and a future thing (last days) but we don't really think of it as a now thing. We don't hear this as a trumpet call to us to be citizens of this new reign of God right now. We don't hear a vocation to live in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces as citizens of a new kingdom with different operating principles at work, different values which are driving us. So John calls us to repent.

The OT might make a good place to mine some of the ideas which drive the new kingdom of Jesus: Comfort is a priority, not punishment. God as a shepherd cares for the little and weak. Good news is proclaimed. Rough patches are made smooth, not ruptured further. The life is organized around the enduring Word of God, not some transitory gain for today. Peter reminds us that this old world passes away, burned up in the great cosmic incinerator.

This kingdom has begun now, it began when Jesus walked the shores of Galilee. It continues to this day. It is not just an end of the world thing; although it is that too. The point of Christmas is that Jesus comes twice. He established a new kingdom when he wore a crown of thorns and we live in that kingdom right now because we are baptized into his death and have been raised with him to new life (Rom. 6). That means we get to live right now by the principles and virtues of that kingdom in which the King loves the little people and takes up a towel to serve. We live in a kingdom in which the hungry are fed and the sinner is forgiven. We live in a kingdom right now in which the sick are cared for and the feeble are strengthened. We live in a new kingdom where we have no real enemies, for Christ has died for all. We can cross the picket lines and the protest marches and there isn't a person out there we cannot sit down and talk with, because Jesus died for that person. We bear no grudges, we seek no vengeance. We are the agents of that new thing which God is doing.