GOOD NEWS, REPENT!

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

December 6, 2020

A wise man once said that he tried never to let people get so far out on a limb that they couldn’t get back in. He was the head master of a preparatory school. As an administrator he did everything he could to enable the staff to make meaningful contributions to the school. He positively reinforced good performance; and, when a staff member got out on a limb, he not only initiated efforts to help the person back in, he also avoided putting undue stress on mistakes or attitudes which made it difficult to COME back in.

To me this is a model for maturity, not to mention Christian love. He came close to loving another as I’m sure he would wish to be loved himself. Never let another get so far out on a limb that there’s no coming back in. Looked at in another way, he built into circumstances and relationships those conditions which make for healing.

We have all seen movies and TV of people who crawl out on a ledge, high above the street, prepared to jump. Things are just so overwhelming. He’s just done too many bad things. There’s just nothing good in him or for him. So he’s going to jump.

An officer, skilled in human dynamics, is called to the scene. She pleads with the person not to jump. Most often it is something worth saving in them that she touches. The rescuer sees something of worth in the other and uncovers it for them to see, no matter how small the spark of life may be at the time. And maybe just as importantly, she uncovers a way to convince the other that there really is a way to turn around and come back in.

Maybe they’re not as sexy or as interesting to screenplay writers, but parents are the best models of such loving and knowing. All over the world prodigal sons and daughters are being allowed to find their own ways, only later to be welcomed back home with open arms, arms that redeem a previously wasted life. Parents know from experience and empathy the itch their children have to find their own feet. They love them enough to grant them freedom, trusting that in due time they will come to themselves, which is to say come back in off that limb they’ve climbed out on. And they make it seem to the wandering one as if there really can be a way back home.

This is the procedure which God chose, and by which he MAINTAINED his relationship with Israel, which was constantly tearing itself away from their God. This is the way by which God brought His people back in again and again.

Let’s take a look at the circumstances surrounding our text. The Israelites were in exile. For decades they had rejected the covenant relationship to God by personal willfulness and disobedience. Against the Word of God from the prophets, they entered into alliances against the conquering Babylonians. Finally, in vengeance, Babylonia swept upon Jerusalem, leveled it to the ground, and carried the able-bodied men and women into exile.

In Babylon the Israelites were strangers in a strange land, exiles. With no homeland, and no Temple in which to worship their God, they had crawled so far out on a limb of willfulness that the consequences of their behavior began to take over, and pushed them even farther along.

It looked then as if the limb would break and Israel would fall away into the dust of history as countless other nations had. In their faithlessness and their ignoring of the covenant, they had put themselves into slavery, had put themselves so far out on a limb that their very existence was threatened.

Into the bleakness of their despairing situation comes this glorious breakthrough of God, spreading out His arms, offering a way back in. God announces that, yes, God will continue to honor God’s covenant with them . . . not for anything they have done, you understand, but because of God’s continuing love for His people.

“Comfort, comfort my people . . . speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . . her iniquity is pardoned.” Then follows a poetic image that is repeated again and again in Scripture. Scripture describes how God will express God’s love by building a road back to Jerusalem.

And yet it’s surprising to note what the road is going to look like. It won’t be without some real, radical change.

And also in Mark. Mark says that the beginning of the Gospel, the beginning of the GOOD NEWS of Jesus Christ was *John’s coming to preac*h in the wilderness. And when John preached, he hurled grenades. He shouted; he raved. No respecter of social class, when people appeared before John in all their Sunday finery, their minks and false furs, he told them to rip off those coats and give them away to the poor. He called them chaff blown by the wind into the fire.

And the people trotted out into the wilderness to HEAR this strange preacher named John . . . . And when they came, he confronted them with an ax, stones, a winnowing fork separating the wheat from the chaff, and with fire. Why would people come out to hear that? Is this enabling people to come back in off their limbs?

Yeah, it is. And I’ll tell you why I think it is. The ax, the winnowing fork, children from stones, the refiner’s fire -- these are all images of change. Weird John, the Baptist, had a simple message. It was a message that everybody wanted to hear, and nobody wanted to hear.

Here was the message: YOU CAN CHANGE. That’s what “Repentance” means. Change.

Where there is wilderness, the ax is laid to the tree to make a straight path. From nothing but stones in the muck, children of God will come forth. Chaff is burned away so that the good wheat Is left. Polluted, contaminated ore is refined, until there is pure gold.

Herod hated John, and had him killed, because Herod did not want to hear about change. Those who are in power, those up at the top, the establishment, don’t want to hear change. Why change? They like things as they are, sitting atop the good old status quo. The status quo is good for them.

But multitudes came out to hear John. The majority of us are not content with what our status quo is. We want in off this limb we’ve climbed out on. Well, when John preached, even his fierce preaching sounded like good news, because he dared to speak of change.

A counselor said that after twenty years of counseling, he has learned one thing: people rarely do change. Oh, there can be some modest movement. But fundamental, drastic change in personality is rare. Change is so rare that many counselors don’t even aim for it. They content themselves with small moves, minor adjustments in behavior.For most of our days, this is enough. When asked to comment on the state of affairs, we make witty, cynical comments. Pick up the paper in the morning; no news there. ‘See? I told you so. Nothing new under the sun.’ Or this . . . ‘take me and my wife. I keep not doing what I know I should, it just seems to be such a herculean step to take, embarrassing, vulnerable to do anything different. And the relationship seems to be cold and getting colder.’ Nothing new under the sun. People are always the same.

But you know, occasionally, there may be a voice, a word, an image that radically reorients us, that opens a door, that provides a way back from out on that limb. Before there can be change, there has to be promise of change. That was what John preached, you know. He spoke to the religious establishment, the cultured and the refined, to soldiers, to the common people under occupation. He announced the coming of God. He promised change.

And that is good news.

Jesus’ sermons began with John’s sermons. John told them, “The Messiah is coming. The Kingdom of God is right now. Not everything is fixed and tied down.” That has to be the most frightening news you’ll ever hear . . . and the very best.

You *can* change. When God’s Messiah walks in, stands at the door and knocks, calls your name, is born among us, you and I can change. The fierce grip of our financial, our societal, our psychological determinism is broken. With ax, winnowing fork, and fire, the world begins to shift. And that is God’s good news.

Amen.