

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**

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**Worship Series: *The King Shall Come***

**Service Theme: *Prepare to Meet Him***

**Sermon Theme: *Hearing Voices in Advent***

**December 10, 2023—Isaiah 40:1-11**

Have you been hearing voices lately? I certainly have! And I bet you have too. Before you start heading for the exits because “pastor’s hearing voices,” let me explain. There are a lot of different voices vying for our attention this time of year. The voice of your kids or grandkids reminding you what’s on their Christmas list. The voice of your spouse, running through the Christmas prep to-do list. The voice of companies telling you what you need to buy to be happy. The voice of charities asking you to give a little extra. The voice of Christmas card pictures of beautiful families, and social media posts of perfectly decorated houses, and festive activities that tell you “you’re inadequate.” Your own overwhelmed inner voice, screaming with stress due to deadlines and hectic holiday busyness.

So many different voices vying for your attention that the “happy holidays” can sound like a deafening roar. But to truly prepare to meet the coming King, we need to be **Hearing Voices in Advent**. These voices can give us calm, peace, and perspective like no other, as long as we’re listening to the right voices!

We hear the first necessary voice in Isaiah’s prophecy, calling out faintly, as if from a distance. *A voice of one calling, “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.”*

Isaiah visualizes a common scene in ancient times. When kings traveled, they would often send messengers, called forerunners, ahead of them to let the towns and villages along his route know that the king

was coming. One reason they did that was to warn the townspeople that they needed to get their stretch of road in proper condition for the king’s arrival. If the President planned a parade route down Main Street of your city, you can bet there would be workers out there, filling potholes, leveling bumps, and patching cracks.

So these forerunners had two important messages to proclaim: The king is coming! And, prepare yourselves for his arrival! For 500 years, no one knew who this messenger Isaiah prophesied was or would be. But as modern-day Christians, we have the benefit of seeing the whole picture, connecting Old Testament prophecies with their New Testament fulfillments.

Mark’s Gospel puts a face and a name to Isaiah’s unknown forerunner. ***“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”***

The first voice we need to hear in Advent is the voice of John, sometimes called John the Baptist, or the Baptizer. John was Jesus’ first cousin-once-removed, and a fascinating Biblical character! We’re told ***“John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*** But it was John’s message, not his appearance that drew a crowd! ***“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”***

Like the forerunners before him, John’s message was twofold: The king is coming, so prepare yourselves for his arrival! But John wasn’t warning people of their need for road construction! At least, not physically. Yes, crooked paths needed straightening. Gaping valleys needed filling. Towering hills needed leveling. Rugged terrain needed smoothing. However, that construction wasn’t needed on the Israelites’ roads, but on their hearts!

A rolling, twisting highway rising through tall mountains and plummeting into deep valleys, covered with potholes, sinkholes, and boulders to block the way is a fitting picture of sinful people's hearts. People like the Israelites... and like us. From spiritual apathy and indifference; to false gods and false senses of security; to worldly or self-righteous mindsets; to outright impenitence over sin—all are spiritual obstacles and barriers that get in the way of Lord's coming to us!

That's why John warned, "***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.***" That's why 2,000 years later, our sin-roadblocked hearts still need to hear John's voice, calling us to repent!

You might visualize repentance like making a spiritual U-turn—pulling a 180 in our minds and hearts about sin. Repentance means to stop loving sin and start despising it; to stop seeing sin as desirable, and start seeing sin as destructive; to stop being self-righteous, and admit we're self-hopeless. Repentance means we do necessary road construction on our hearts—filling in potholes of apathy, leveling off hills of self-righteousness, smoothing out the rough patches of impenitence, and straightening out the crookedness of sin so our hearts are prepared for the Savior's arrival!

But we're very good at turning U-Turns of repentance into traffic circles. Picture yourself driving on a sinful road that leads away from God. When God's law cuts you to the heart, and leads you to confess your sins, repentance pulls a U-Turn and heads back toward God and away from sin. But Satan is an expert at telling us to re-route our repentance U-turns, and just continue right around the traffic circle back onto the same sinful paths again.

That's why John doesn't just tell people, "Repent!" He "***came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.***" We need to be specially connected to the one who has forgiven our sins; specially connected to the power of God's Word which transforms our sinful, unnavigable hearts into places where God dwells by faith. That's what baptism does. It connects us to the one John proclaimed as the greater one who was coming, "***The Lamb of God, who takes away***

***the sin of the world.***" Repentance isn't just feeling bad about your sins, or reconstructing your attitude and actions toward sin, although it certainly includes that. Repentance also means trusting in and clinging to Christ for the forgiveness we so desperately need for all the times we turn our U-turns into traffic circles.

That's why we also need to hear the second voice in Advent—the voice of God. We hear God's voice in the two verses that begin today's sermon text. Two verses that are some of the most beautiful, comforting promises in all of Scripture.

In the preceding chapter, Isaiah had just prophesied that the people of Israel would be conquered and taken in exile to Babylon for their lack of repentance. Talk about a time they needed comfort! So God instructs Isaiah, "***Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.***"

He tells his messenger, "***Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.***" Literally, speak to their hearts. Comfort them not with generic, nice sounding platitudes, but proclaim comfort specifically for everything that weighed down their hearts with despair. God had promises of comfort for them all. And whatever is weighing on your heart: fear, anger, guilt, shame, doubt...God's Word and promises speak comfort to your burdened hearts too.

God assures, "***Proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.***" The Hebrew word translated "hard service," means a period of military service. God's people's warfare is over. The battle has been won, so now there is peace! God assures them "***your sin has been paid for.***" The redemption price needed to set us free has been paid in full. It is finished! "***She has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.***" Not only had people's sins been paid for, our gracious, merciful God gives double grace in return!

Friends, there is so much grace, so much good news in those words! If God used them to comfort his people whose future included them and their children being captured and carried away in exile, then doesn't he send these same words of comfort to us, his people, in any and every situation we face in life too? This is the message of God's voice for

you, no matter what the other voices vying for your attention and heart have to say!

The prophecies God relayed through his prophets were sometimes fulfilled in different ways, by different people, at different times. In an immediate fulfillment, all of God's promises for the people of Judah were fulfilled when they were delivered from their exile, and would be brought safely back home to Jerusalem. But Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies! He is the one who comforts us, and gives us perfect, eternal peace. He is the one who has paid for all of our sins completely, taking them on himself and giving us double grace in return. Jesus, the one Isaiah was prophesying when he said, ***"The glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together."***

Hear John's voice, calling us to repentance! Hear God's voice, assuring us of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus! But there's one more voice that needs to be heard in Advent. Yours! Just as God called John to be the forerunner of Christ, he also calls on us to proclaim the twofold message that the king is coming, and help prepare people for his arrival. ***"You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"***

You don't have to go out into the wilderness to preach it. You can share it with your neighbor over the back fence. You don't have to don camels' hair or eat grasshoppers. You can share it with your co-worker as you sip punch at your work Christmas party. You don't have to shout it from a mountaintop. You can share it on the sidewalk as you walk with your friend. You can share it by using a postcard to invite someone to Christmas Eve services with you (and you get to screw in a lightbulb!) You can proclaim it by sharing Victory's Christmas Eve social media posts. You can share the message of comfort with someone who's alone and homebound on Christmas Eve by inviting them to tune in to the service via livestream.

But with so many voices competing for people's attention this time of year, make sure your voice is heard, as we proclaim to the nations, ***"Here is your God!"*** Make sure John's voice is heard as he proclaims the message we all need to constantly hear and put into practice, ***"Repent! Prepare the way for the Lord!"*** Make sure in a time when people feel overwhelmed and devoid of comfort, that God's voice is heard. ***"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."*** Hear those voices in Advent, and let them be heard! They'll give you calm, peace, comfort, and perspective like no other voices can.