

## **Echoes of Repentance**

Sunday Advent 2, Year B

Isaiah 40: 1 – 11; 2 Peter 3: 8 – 14; Mark 1: 1 – 8

December 6, 2020

*Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

You may not be aware, but today once had great significance in the Church. It was a day celebrated by many, and in some places, is still a day of celebration. This is the day that children used to get gifts, before that tradition was moved to Christmas Day. This is the day that a great man of the Church was celebrated, before he was turned into the guy that brought those Christmas gifts.

This is the Feast of St. Nicholas, a fourth century bishop. Not only is he known as a pastor and a man of great generosity, but he was also a staunch defender of the Trinity, even in the face of fierce opposition. He was at the Council of Nicaea and may have had a hand in writing the Nicene Creed. The very Creed that we will recite together today. Because of his voice, defending the doctrine of the Trinity, we join our voices with his in that creed that has been on the lips of the faithful for some 1700 years.

But, while today is St. Nicholas' feast day, I want to turn to another voice. This one didn't echo in the halls of a council, but was alone in the wilderness.

We hear about this voice today in the Gospel of St. Mark. Mark is the Gospel writer for the common era. His Gospel is quick, fast, and in a hurry. It is almost as if he is less writing a book, and more posting to Twitter or Facebook.

Mark doesn't waste time with all the background information that Matthew and Luke give us. Where Luke takes three chapters to get from Jesus birth to baptism to temptation in the wilderness; it only takes Mark 13 verses!

Mark begins, not with a genealogy, like Matthew, detailed storytelling, like Luke, or a theological assertion, like John, but with an appeal to the great prophet; Isaiah. “*Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’*” (v2-3).

Then, Mark immediately continues, “John appeared.” Almost like he did not exist until that moment and just miraculously shows up and begins to baptize and proclaim ‘*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*’ (v4).

Yet, notice John’s message. He is brazenly proclaiming it. Yet, his message has nothing to do with elections, COVID, or even about those pesky Romans that were ruining the daily life and religion of the Jews. John was not preaching how to have your best life now or 12 steps to a better tomorrow. He had one message and he preached it repeatedly; repent, repent, repent.

Well, what is repentance? Often, repentance is seen as a change of heart in a person. This is true. However, it isn’t something that we do on our own. Repentance is a realization that you are sinful. Usually, this follows some specific sinful act, deed, word or thought. The act brings with it a feeling of conviction that causes you to turn to God for help.

But, that conviction comes as a result of the Holy Spirit’s work. Without the Holy Spirit working in the heart of you and me, we would not ever turn to God for help. We might turn to the bottle, the refrigerator or some other place to soothe our conscience and relieve our guilt, but the Holy Spirit brings us to the cross of Christ. Repentance is turning away from the incurvatus, the love of self and relying on self to soothe our own conscience and guilt, and has looking outside ourselves and relying solely on the mercy of our Heavenly Father.

That is exactly what John is proclaiming. And, he does so, not just with his words, but with his very life and actions. The man not only was preaching a message of repentance, but he

lived the very life of repentance. His whole life was one of denying self and breaking the curse of the incurvatus; the love of self, the very thing that had our first parents removed from the Garden of Eden. Some would call it pride or love of self. We simply call it the incurvatus in se. Or, even more simply; sin.

John did not drink alcohol (maybe he really was a Baptist). He wore clothes made of camel hair (no one has camel hair clothes on the Christmas list for a reason). And, he ate locusts and honey (not very Keto or vegan).

He lived in the wilderness. The wilderness, in Scripture, is not just a rugged place where you might go to camp or hike. It was a place of outcasts and curse. The wilderness was undesirable. It is where violent and wild animals prowled around, seeking someone to devour.

Yet, that was John's home. He wasn't just calling people to repentance, but he was living it. He relied on God and, more than that, he sought God. He was not just proclaiming the coming salvation of God, but he, himself, was looking for it.

John's voice comes with a resounding call to repentance. A call that God would change the hearts of His people to look to, look for, and follow the promised Messiah.

John's voice cries out for those around him to hear the good news of God's deliverance and turn to that God.

The people had heard of the coming Messiah. They had waited for the Messiah. Many had died in the hope that the Messiah would have appeared during the lifetime. Yet, here is John, a lone voice in the wilderness, crying out that the Messiah is very near. St. Matthew, in his Gospel, records John crying out, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

And, St. Mark, today, has John's voice crying out to the people, "*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*" (v.7-8).

Here today we, too, have heard of the coming of the Messiah. Many have waited for Him to come again. Many have died in the hope that the Messiah would have come in their lifetime. And, so do we. We are still waiting.

So, it is important for us to hear John's voice and his message. The Messiah is coming again. Repentance is what is needed here today, in this place... in every place. In some respects, we have lost our way. We have become complacent because it seems the Messiah will never come again. We have waited a very long time. It just doesn't seem all that important anymore.

Yet, here we are. Hearing the echoes of the voices of bold men from our ancient past. We speak their words, like the words of St. Nicholas in the Creed. We listen to their words, like the words of Isaiah, St. Peter and St. John the Baptizer calling us to repentance and dependence on God's Messiah.

But, while the echo is still resounding off the walls of our wildernesses, as we deal with things like COVID and vaccines, elections and politics, pain and suffering, death and defeat... do we only hear the faded echo of their voices? Or, do we hear and heed them loud and clear?

Are their words simply the words of people long gone? Or, are they a call to action for our faith today?

Shall we remain complacent and rely on ourselves and the comfort of promises of politicians, vaccines, pop Christianity and the like? Or, do the words of those men of old no longer sound like a fading echo, but a sweet call to return to the safety of a God who loves you, who sent His Son to die for you, who redeems you, who desires to have you as His own, and

who will come again to claim you and give you eternal life? As St. John proclaims... *“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie...”*

Not only are we unworthy to stoop down and untie his sandals, we are unworthy to stoop down and worship Him. Yet, that is exactly what He allows us to do. Not by our own worthiness, but by the worthiness of the Lamb who was slain on our behalf.

<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”* (2 Peter 3:9).

*Amen.*