

A GRACIOUS INVITATION TO BE RIGHT AT HOME

Sermon, December 6, 2020

The Second Sunday of Advent

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11, (Psalm 85) Mark 1:1-8, II Peter 3:8-15

I would like to re-read a verse from our Epistle lesson, II Peter 3:13 -- *"But, in accordance with His promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."* Peter writes about a day and a place where righteousness will be "at home" ... a place where the right and the good and the true and the trustworthy and the dependable and honorable is completely at home. And it will not be as a guest, nor as an occasional visitor, but as a permanent resident the right, good, true, honorable, etc. will be totally, fully and comfortably "at home."

What a day and a place that will be!

The sermon title is a bit of a play on words. We tell people ... back once upon a time when we used to be allowed to have company ... *"Make yourselves right at home."* Or, *"Be right at home."* Well, if you think about it, that can be a loving invitation and it can also be something of a bold challenge or even a stern admonition! In fact, it might even be part of a great Mission Statement for a church! We want to be about doing all we can with the help of God's grace and love and mercy and strength to *make things right* and good, starting with being "right" and good and honest and trustworthy and dependable in our homes where we live! Yes, by God's grace and aid and leading, DO *"make yourselves RIGHT at home."* And to mix metaphors a bit, all will be "right at home" when the right, the good, the true, the honorable, the dependable *is* comfortably at home in our homes and lives.

Is there a place where true goodness, authentic virtue, genuine compassion exists in abundance and as the norm, where it isn't mixed or tainted with impure motives, or where it does not have to be on constant guard lest it be taken advantage of? Is there anyplace in this world where true gentleness, kindness, and selflessness thrives, and doesn't have to live in danger of being crucified once again? Is there a place like that in the world of politics, the world of finance, the world of arts or education or entertainment, the world of human relationships? Is there a place like that even in the church? What would it mean to live in a world where everyone acted justly and lovingly and kindly and considerately and lovingly with one another, and not because we were supposed to, but because it was our nature, our instinct, to do so? In short, a place where **RIGHT** is right at home? As Psalm 85 so wonderfully describes, a place where *"... mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."*

Well, Peter promises such a world is coming. Using somewhat apocalyptic language, Peter tells us there will be a Day, "the Day of the Lord," when righteousness *will* be finally and fully at home. He doesn't mean this so much as a threat, but as an encouragement! There is coming a day, Peter writes, when all that is **RIGHT** and good will be right at home. Peter writes, *"[Knowing this] what sort of persons ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and [thus] hasten its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But according to His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."* In other words, Peter is saying, *"As you and I make every effort to live right, as we do the right thing, righteousness begins to find a home in us, AND this world then becomes a little more like the world to come ... a little more like heaven ... and thus we hasten the arrival of that wonderful Day when righteousness will be fully at home."*

As we pray every Sunday, *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* As we pray that prayer, we do so with the intention of trying to make this earth more like heaven by the good and right and honorable conduct of our lives ... and, in Peter's words, in so doing we hasten the arrival of the wonderful Day.

Who doesn't long to be right at home? That's a universal human instinct. Isaiah was speaking to Jewish exiles who longed to be home; in fact, the Old Testament history is that they weren't at home in the first place largely because of so many things they didn't do **RIGHT** at home when they were at home! God directed the prophet, *"Comfort, comfort my people."* (you may remember the word "comfort" comes from two Latin words, "cum" and "forte", which literally means, "with strength.") *"Encourage My people, Isaiah, come 'with strength' for them, tell them their sin has been paid for, their hard service has been completed."* The voice of the prophet proclaims, *"Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* He is using what would be familiar imagery to these exiles. In the days of the Babylonian empire, engineer soldiers known as "sappers" would precede the monarch as he traveled in his chariot. The herald would give the command, *"Prepare the way for the king,"* and the sappers would virtually construct the king's road as he traveled through the wilderness. They leveled hills, built up ditches, filled in holes, removed dead wood ... whatever would hinder the king's approach, they would take care of it in order to enable the royal chariot to make speed.

In today's Gospel, we are introduced to John the Baptist with the same words used by Isaiah the Prophet. As Mark describes it, John arrives on the scene preaching the need for repentance. The purpose of John's preaching is not so much to **indict**, as it is to **invite** ... his words may even be seen as a gracious invitation! In short, he tells those who will hear *to do what it takes* to make themselves RIGHT at home! Remove whatever it might be that might hinder God's saving approach in their lives, just get it out of the way. To make themselves RIGHT at home, they will need to repent. They will need to do what they can to make their lives a place where RIGHT will BE at home. And to do that, they are going to need grace and help; they are going to need a Savior.

As Mark and Luke relate to us (*Luke's account of John's arrival is found in Luke 3*), this message of the need for repentance apparently brought the crowds out. **Huge** crowds, we are told, came to listen to and be baptized by John. Why? Because I really do think people want to be *right* at home. Again, it is a universal human longing to be right at home, in all senses of that word "right." People want to be able to enjoy what's good and right. People want to be able to trust each other. People want to be able to trust their leaders and representatives and their neighbors and their families, people long to have the peace and confidence that comes when we can trust others to be right and honorable and trustworthy and good. And, for that matter, we long to be able to live in the comfort of knowing our goodness and trust and courtesy will not be taken advantage of by unscrupulous others who use our "niceness" to take advantage of us. When things are NOT right in our homes, in our communities, in our nation ... that's when we have great difficulty feeling right at home.

And we know we don't measure up to our own expectations, let alone God's. I don't have to remind you that your worst judge, the sharpest of all your critics, is that person who faces you every single morning ... in the bathroom mirror. No matter how hard we try to make changes, no matter how many changes we've made, our reflected critic keeps looking back at us saying, *"Not good enough."* So it really isn't surprising that a great crowd gathered around John the Baptist. *"Preach it, brother John. We know we don't measure up. We know our ways have been crooked, we know we have valley sized gaps that need to be filled, we know we have mountainous difficulties that need to be leveled. We know the mistakes we have made. We ache that we've hurt the people we love most."* I don't know about you, but I have just about had my fill of those who tell us all our problems are someone else's fault. We know what we have done! What we don't know is what we should *do* about it, how to go about doing what it takes to make ourselves "right at home."

Mark is not big on details, but he makes it clear that many people responded. Confessing their sins, owning up to their responsibilities, they repented. In the more detailed parallel account in Luke 3, they asked, *"What should we do? What should we do to make ourselves 'right at home'?"* That is what they really wanted to know. In Luke's account, John simply replies with such things as, *"Well, whoever has two coats should share with anyone who has none. Those who have food should share it with those who don't. Tax collectors should not cheat. Soldiers should not bully people. And be content with your wages."* And so on. These prescriptions are striking in their obvious simplicity. John is not telling these people things they did not know. He is not asking them to do anything heroic. He is simply telling them to do the right thing as they have opportunity, beginning right now (*which, come to think of it, simply doing the right and honorable thing is becoming increasingly heroic these days; but that's almost another sermon.*) To this list we could add other things that we know to be right, things we know we ought to do. "Treat your spouse or your children with respect and love. Don't complain so much (*during the Lighting of the Advent Wreath, I referred to the quote of Teddy Roosevelt: "Complaining about a problem without posing a solution is called Whining."*) Honor your commitments. Stop lying. Quit cheating." John basically tells them to start doing what they already know to be right, right now! To take simple, purposeful, everyday decisions to "make yourselves right at home;" take steps to make the crooked straight.

Doing the right thing isn't really all that complicated. But it CAN be hard. Or, as someone else put it, doing the right thing is simple, but it isn't always easy.

More often than not, the problem isn't not knowing what we ought to do. The problem isn't even wanting to do what we know we ought to do. The problem is actually carrying through and DOING it, taking the risk and making the effort and following through. For various reasons what we know is the right thing to do may just be too daunting, too frightening, too intimidating; we think it's going to take more energy and resolve and effort than we think we can give. We need help. But we really don't discover we need help until we make the sincere effort to actually *do* what is right. We find we need help making the crooked straight. We need help smoothing out the rough edges of our lives. We need help filling the huge gaps of need. We need help raising our children, we need help setting a higher tone at the office, we need help honoring our commitments ... in short, we need help being right at home.

And the voice of the one crying in the wilderness says, *"That's RIGHT! Now you are ready for Christmas. Now you are ready for a Savior."* Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Come and help make us RIGHT at home, until that glorious day when righteousness will be at home forever and ever!