

Repent! The Shaking Continues

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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My friend, Peter Marty writes about taking a field trip to an anechoic chamber at the Orfield Laboratories in Minneapolis. An anechoic chamber means literally, “without echo.” It is a specially made sound-absorbent room in which the background noise actually measures in negative decibels. For example, a perfectly quiet room in a well-built house is about 30 dB, Orfield Labs have a chamber where the noise level is -20.3 dB. For \$600/hour, you can pay for the experience of being alone in that chamber. Few visitors last longer than 20 minutes, says lab owner Steve Orfield, due to the unsettling disorientation that sets in immediately after the vault doors close and the lights go out.

The lack of an echo removes all air pressure on the ear drums, which therefore, sabotages spatial awareness and dissolves one’s sense of balance. Most guests sit down quickly. To hear your own heart beating, blood flowing, bones grinding, and lungs expanding, researchers have noted, does most people in. The experience is highly disconcerting. It shakes people up. You suddenly must endure a confrontation with yourself as the sounds of your own body start to drive you crazy (*The Christian Century*, December 2023).

The wilderness or desert in the Bible functions as a kind of anechoic chamber where the inhabitants must endure a confrontation with themselves and with God, that is highly disconcerting.

We also call it Advent.

The desert is silent. Not much going on there. Not much living there. Silence. Sometimes the winds blow but mostly just silence. People would go to the desert to try to listen to God, but it has been 400 years since anyone heard anything from God. 400 years of nothing. 400 years of silence. Then Mark says with his stark suddenness, there was a voice. A single voice. Way out in the desert, out of the silence a lone voice crying “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.”

Mark calls him John the Baptizer. He looked like something from 400 years before, or even longer. He looked like the greatest prophet, Elijah, and he echoed the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, “Make straight in the desert a highway for God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low... (Isaiah 40:4). After 400 years of silence, out in that place of disconcerting silence, came a voice.

And people said it was a voice from God. So out they came to hear this voice. Desperate for a word from God, people left their settled, organized, orienting places and went out – out of reach and out of control – of Rome, of Herod, and beyond their own control. They left their suburban homes, their jobs, their routines, left the familiar, the comfortable, the reliable to hear this gaunt and unruly voice, utterly out of sync with his age or any age. “Prepare. Prepare! Get ready for the Lord God is coming.”

She glanced up from her phone she was busily checking, looking down at me sitting at a table with a cup of coffee and books and a notepad spread out, “What are you working on, Kyle?” I said it was Advent and I was writing a sermon on getting ready for God. Her hurried reply, “God never seems to show up for me,”

as she rushed on out the door. I thought, “Maybe God shows up, but you’ve never been prepared.”

When I had Fred Craddock years ago, while I was in Atlanta, Dr. Craddock walked in the door on the first day of class, looked at the clock and exactly at 1:00 sharp, locked the door and went to the podium. “The door will be locked promptly at 1:00 each day. Tardiness to class will not be permitted. If you’re not here on time, you’ll be locked out. Furthermore, there will be no late papers. Anything turned in late will receive an automatic F. Either get it in on-time or don’t turn it in.” He went on, “You will do the readings on time for each day of class. If you don’t, then you won’t understand what I’m talking about and both your time and mine will be wasted. If you can’t find the time to do the reading, don’t bother coming to class.”

We were appropriately in shock, stunned, all shook up. Then Dr. Craddock, smiled, changed the tenor of his voice, and said, “Look, when you’re a pastor and 11:00 on Sunday morning comes around, you can’t be late. And when it is time to stand up and preach, there are no late sermons. You must be prepared. You have to do your homework to teach and preach. Indeed, to be a Christian you must be prepared. So, you had better start getting used to it, now... Any questions?” There were none.

Out in the desert, John says, “Prepare!”

There is a reason I tell so many stories from the black church and civil rights movement. Why you hear from me stories of the early Baptists and Anabaptists and why you hear so much about the French village and church of Le Chambon with their pastor Andre Trocme, who saved 3000 Jews from the Nazis during

World War II. For my 34 years being here much of my calling with you has been to prepare you.

To be prepared for God in the midst of uncertainty and challenge means that our preparation has to be deep and wide. It has to have more depth and width than any of us as individuals have stored up and it has to be more than our 55 years as a congregation has stored. So, I try to help us reach down into the deep wells of living water from the black church who has known what it means to be outsiders, out of sync with the Powers of this world for centuries because they have walked with God for centuries. When 14-year-olds went out to face the police dogs and water hoses, the jail and torture of Bull Connor in 1963 in Birmingham, they were prepared by a church singing and praying and preaching with them for several days, even weeks before hand. But more, they had been being baptized into a community of Christ preparing to meet Bull Connor and the Powers of White Supremacy for 400 years.

The French Protestants in Le Chambon were able to resist the Nazis because they had been in the middle of the desert surviving by trusting only God for centuries. When the Jews showed up needing safety, it was in the Le Chambon DNA. They knew what to do.

When my Anabaptist and Mennonite friends stand for peace with local people in the midst of war zones and places of violence like in South and Central America and in Israel and the Middle East, they are not simply peacemakers by themselves, they have been prepared by a community of peacemakers going back five centuries.

When the people go to hear John out in the desert, they are not simply hearing an individual preacher. They are hearing a voice rooted in Elijah and Isaiah

and Malachi and the prophets of old. When John's voice cries in the wilderness he has been immersed in God and Scripture and the community stretching across time and space and when he calls people to repent and be baptized, he is calling them to enter this community of depth and width so they are capable of knowing God when God shows up.

Advent asks all of us if we can enter such preparation, so we are ready to hear the Living Christ and follow him in hard times and serve him in difficult places? We are training you to be responsible.

One of the things Baptists usually say when asked why we practice believer's baptism, is that we think a person should be responsible when they are baptized. One of the great twentieth century theologians was Yale's H. Richard Niebuhr, who wrote a book called *The Responsible Self*, published in 1963 shortly after his death. Niebuhr said that a responsible person is one capable of dialogue with herself or himself about how to respond to an action upon her or him. In other words, the individual person looks within the self to decide what is the proper response to something going on outside of the self (see Niebuhr, p. 56; and Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real*, p. 296).

But when we Baptists say a person should be responsible for baptism, we are not talking about the same thing as Niebuhr. We mean that a person needs to be able to respond to Jesus Christ. What we seek to do is prepare a person, so they know the call of Christ to baptism when they hear it. We want to prepare you to be capable of hearing the call of following Christ as a disciple and showing it in baptism.

Mark says John the Baptizer was out in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was preaching, "The Lord God is

coming and to be prepared to hear God and know God, you must begin by repenting and showing it in baptism.

Repentance does not mean simply being contrite or feeling sorry. It means changing our life. To repent means that we are going in one direction in life, and we turn around 180 degrees and go in another direction. For people to go hear John preaching in the desert itself was a kind of embodiment of repentance. The customary and orthodox way of thinking in that context was that one went to Jerusalem and the Temple to know God. But John in the wilderness was in the opposite direction. A person needed to turn around and go in the direction of the desert in order to prepare to meet God.

Advent means taking a long look at our own sin and failings, not someone else's and praying for God to help us change our ways and go in another direction.

I've already mentioned that John out in the desert looks and sounds like the great prophet Elijah. We also have already mentioned that John is connected to the prophet Isaiah with his preaching this message from Isaiah chapter 40. But John is also connected to a third prophet, the little-known prophet Malachi. In the Christian Bible the book of Malachi is the last book in what we call the Old Testament. I think the final words of the Christian Old Testament are amazing.

Now Malachi foresees a "great and terrible day," the day of judgment and the coming of the Lord. All will be shaken, and all will be made right and just. And then at the very last moment the language of the wrath of God shifts. Here is the very last word of the Old Testament: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah [in other words, John the Baptizer] before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children

to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5). That’s it. Then 400 years of silence.

I think this is remarkable. With all this wild, apocalyptic talk of the signs of the coming judgment of God. With last week’s sun turning dark and stars falling from the sky in Mark 13. With today’s wild Elijah-like John out in the desert preaching, the Word of God says that one of the signs of the old age of Sin and Death is the brokenness of families. Reconciliation between parents and children is a sign that the Living God is near and coming. To put it differently, whenever you see or participate in the reconciliation of family, including the church family, you are seeing and participating in God and God’s work. The Way of God is breaking into our old broken and unjust world, when there is reconciliation of family.

Over the years in conversations with therapists and counselors – some as friends or colleagues and some as my own therapists, I’ve asked, “What is the most important ingredient to a strong marriage?” At the same time, as a veteran pastor of 43 years, and in conversation with some of the finest veteran pastors anywhere, we all agree that the most important ingredient for a strong church is the same as it is for a strong marriage. Asking forgiveness.

In families and in church families, the mark of health and strength is forgiveness – both in giving forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. It means going to each other and actually saying, “Will you forgive me?” This is repentance. And it is the beginning of reconciliation, to go to each other and say, “You know, I was wrong and I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.” That is a sign that the kingdom of God is intervening into our world.

In order to move forward into the future – whatever the future holds – John is telling us we need to look behind at our past. We look behind at a community of

faith that includes the depth and width of the black church and Le Chambon and the Anabaptists and others. We look behind, as well, at our past brokenness and failures and sin – our sin with our children, our spouses, our church family including the black church, and repent. Repentance is claiming all of that, asking for forgiveness to be able to respond to Christ and follow him into the future.

And you thought Advent was just about getting ready for Christmas.

Tom Long tells the story of a savvy business head of a big retail company coming into a small town. His plan was to open his big store by pricing all his goods at below profit margins. He would temporarily be losing money, but he would also drive a smaller competitor in the town out of business. Then, after cornering the market, he would raise the prices. The CEO knew that the smaller local competitor was a family-owned business and the competitor had three small children, all dependent on the local business. Nevertheless, business is business and nothing personal.

As all this plan was nearly in place, the CEO had a family funeral back in his hometown. During the graveside service the man could see all the gravestones of his ancestors, including his much beloved grandmother's. Inscribed on her stone were these words from the Book of Proverbs: "She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (Proverbs 31: 26).

Over the years, the man had read those words many times when he visited the cemetery. But this time was different. Standing there among family and generations of ancestors, those words jumped out of his past into his present. On his way home, he could not forget those words and his heart burned, "the teaching of kindness."

He returned to his office and changed his direction. He canceled plans to move his store into the small community.

This is repentance.

This is Advent.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.