

The First Sunday in Advent 2007
State College Presbyterian Church
Dr. Charles Curley

God's Promise: Forgiveness
Isaiah 40:1-5
Isaiah 64:1-9
Luke 3:1-6

"Preaching a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins."
Luke 3:3b

There's something about the number three!

Two bad things happen – we automatically expect a third – they come in threes.

I was taught a sermon should have three points – tell 'em, tell 'em again, tell 'em you told em!

One person tells you something, it is just their opinion.

A second tells you the same thing – maybe its collusion.

But when you hear the same thing from three independent sources – it must be the truth!

Today we hear the promise of forgiveness three times.

From three different people.

Is that what it takes for us to accept -- accept the most difficult promise of God for anyone to accept about themselves – “You are forgiven! Yes, you!”

600 years before the birth of Jesus the Promise of God came to the people of Israel exiled in the land of Babylon. The devastation of their nation was complete. They had no land. Their Temple destroyed. Cities burnt. They walked into exile with the little they could carry on their backs.

They consulted their wise ones asking, “Why has this happened?” The wise, the priests, the prophets all agreed: the people had been abandoned by God – and it was their fault!

The wise ones believed that their way of living had strayed so far from the loving will of God that the covenant with Abraham; with Moses, with David had been declared null and void, ended, over!

The people asked one another, "Without God, how shall we live?"

Into their pain, into their hopelessness, came Isaiah the prophet.

What he had to say was so momentous, he envisioned his words in a great drama – as if this were a stage – from one side enters a herald, a town crier: "Comfort!"

(Isaiah 40:1-3)

Another (point to the other side) enters, a voice cries: "In the wilderness. . ."

(Isaiah 40:3-5)

Isaiah promised nothing less than the re-creation of his people. Even though they had been blind to the word, deaf to the teachings, corrupt, unjust, greedy, apathetic to human need, beyond redemption, they **would be** re-created.

Not because of anything they had done. Not because of any recompense they could make. Not because of any promise to be better than they had been.

It was all God. The promise of God: You are forgiven!

The People of God were a forgiven people.

Isaiah said, God's forgiveness is so enormous it will change the very topography of the world.

Valleys will be lifted up, mountains made low – the crooked straight and the rough smoothed out -- by the hand of God.

If God's forgiveness could change the typography of the land, think how much it would change the mountains and valleys of the soul.

So said Isaiah.

The first witness to the promise of forgiveness.

600 years later – into a different kind of exile – to a different kind of pain – to an oppressed people in an oppressive world -- came John the Baptist --

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of

the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, [2] in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; [3] and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [4] As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord."

John's people are in exile in their own homes.

Their lives are not within their control.

Caesar, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas – this is the power which rules their world. And it is hateful to them.

It seems God has deserted them.

Like the exiles in Babylon, God's promises have been defeated; they believed there was no hope. And it was their fault. This heavy oppression was laid upon them because it was their fault.

Then John the Baptist came like a new Isaiah saying, "Yes, it is your fault! But it doesn't matter. Turn around (repent) and receive the forgiveness of your God."

The mountain which was Caesar would fall. The obscene, yawning gulf which was Herod would be filled in – by the power of God. And it would begin with forgiveness.

So said John. The second witness to the Promise of Forgiveness.

And then came Luke. Luke pulled it all together. The promise of Isaiah to Exiles, the promise of John to the morally and physically oppressed.

"You are forgiven," says your God.

But then Luke kicked it up a notch.

To make sure we know how serious God is – God almighty and infinite has come into this world in human flesh.

"I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:16-17)

Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Luke proclaimed the power of forgiveness to dismantle the old; the power of forgiveness to recreate life anew.

All in three little words which are the promise of God: "You are forgiven."

Who can comprehend the consequences of that simple sentence?

Consider what it would be like not to be released from the consequences of what we have done.

Without being forgiven, we would be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover.

Don't you know people like that?

Victims of a single deed, a word, an action that happened long ago?

Psychotherapy is built on the reality of that kind of bondage.

People not able to forgive feelings that happened long ago.

You're probably sick of hearing "I'm O.K."

It is one of the more conspicuous attempts in our time to free ourselves from the consequences of the past.

When a person says "I'm OK," it doesn't imply that she has risen above all her past faults and emotional problems.

It does say that she has accepted her past at least enough not to be completely paralyzed by it.

Yet God wants more for us than "OK."

Within the very ordinary parts of our lives, we forgive, are forgiven. Children forgive parents, spouses forgive one another; relationships are restored.

Within the very ordinary parts of our lives, the opposite happens too. We don't forgive, cannot be forgiven. Relationships are not restored, but irreversibly disintegrate.

That is the nature of life in exile, the nature of the world over which Caesar and Herod reign.

So Luke comes, the third witness, to tell the Good News: "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

This is the unmistakable promise of God – the Promise of Forgiveness.

There is no promise harder for us to hear, accept, believe about ourselves.

I am willing to believe God may forgive you – but me? I know better! Can't be.

A promise has been made, an invitation has been issued to the people of God. But in order to hear, the vision must rise farther than the ordinary give and take of the way things operate on this earth.

In order to hear, the people of God can't be "flat-earthers" who see their lives only in one dimension. It requires a world view which gives absolute primacy to the reality of God.

Can you rise above everything you know about the way things work in this world and understand this -- you are forgiven. You are not bound to what you were.

You are not paralyzed by what you have been.

Can you comprehend what that means?

It will lift every valley, lower every mountain until there is nothing standing in the way of walking the straight path and accepting God's glorious mountain of forgiveness.

God's invitation is nothing less than to be baptized into forgiveness.

It is the most radical invitation of all, because it is not based on our past actions.

It is a re-creation, not an evolution.

Who can comprehend what might happen to us?

The strange word of these three witnesses is that forgiveness will reconstitute the world – your world.

It's a promise.

That is why Isaiah spoke joyfully to his exiled people.

That is why John the Baptist repeated Isaiah to the oppressed people of God.

That is why Luke repeated John the Baptist to the all people bound by guilt, fettered by their past – people living as though Jesus had never come.

That is why I repeat Isaiah, and John, and Luke to you.

Three witnesses. All saying the same thing. The same promise. So it must be true?

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
[5] Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways shall be made smooth;
[6] and **all flesh shall see the salvation of God.**"

You, yes you, are forgiven.

Amen