

SERMON TITLE: “Changing the Landscape”

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

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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2011 is drawing to a close, and the ending of a calendar year always provokes a bit of reflection. What kind of a year has it been? What has dominated the headlines? What are the events and experiences that have shaped our world and our lives?

I am no historian, but if I were to hazard a guess, I would say that 2011 will be remembered as the “year of the protest.”

Throughout the year, around the world, we have seen images of ordinary people—often young people—rising up to challenge the status quo, to express their dissatisfaction with the way things are.

We have seen this in what has been referred to as the “Arab Spring”—the revolutionary wave of protests, demonstrations, and, sometimes, violence, that has swept through nations like Egypt, Libya, Syria, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, and others.

Each context is unique, of course, but each share the theme of saying “no!” to things like corrupt dictatorships, the abuse of power, exploitative greed, economic inequality, human rights violations, mass unemployment, increasing food prices, and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few.

Across the Arab world, 2011 has been a season of significant upheaval and conflict, and no one is quite sure what to expect as 2012 approaches.

And then, there is the “Occupy” movement that began in September in New York City and subsequently spread to cities and towns around the world, and now seems to be fizzling out as winter approaches.

To an even greater extent than in the Arab Spring, the motivations for these protests are also diverse.

Some were protesting economic inequality fueled by the global recession; some were protesting the power and influence of big banks, big business, big anything; some were protesting war and social injustice and environmental degradation; some, it seems, were mainly interested in the idea of protesting and just really wanted to be against something!

Of course, protest isn't exactly anything new. Those of you who lived through the 60's and 70's know this very well. Each generation tends to think of themselves and their concerns as unique and uniquely important.

But there is a common thread that runs through the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, and the thread goes at least as far back as the prophet Isaiah.

We are made to react against injustice.

We sense it in our bones when things aren't right. As human beings, we are hard-wired to long for justice, fairness, and equality. The cry for justice is at the heart of the biblical hope of the kingdom of God.

The in-breaking of God's kingdom is the time when wrongs are righted, when swords become plowshares, when injustices are addressed, when the poor and the lowly are raised up and the rich and the proud brought down.

When God comes to earth, the landscape changes. This theme resounds throughout Scripture.

We see it in our texts this morning.

When the landscape is off-kilter, we are right to sense this and to long for a change.

But part of the change in the landscape is a change in *us*! We are a part of the landscape that needs to be changed.

This is our text from Mark makes clear when it links John the Baptist's call to baptism and repentance with the passage from Isaiah about a voice calling from the wilderness.

In Scripture, the protest against injustice is rarely found without the simultaneous call to repentance and personal transformation.

Whether it is the nation of Israel or the church, the people of God are always part of the problem that needs to be fixed.

This isn't very popular, I know. "Repentance" is not a popular word, nor is any suggestion that there is anything inherently wrong with us.

It is one thing to protest against big corporations or banks or governments, but we're not fond of the spotlight being turned on ourselves. Injustice and corruption are "out there" and need to be addressed, but we are just fine, thank you very much.

I saw a good example of this in an article called “Feeling Lost? Maybe You Need a Soul Coach” from Friday’s *Globe and Mail*. The article discusses the growing phenomenon of personal “soul coaches” who help people get in touch with themselves and gain meaning for their lives, without any of the uncomfortable demands and obligations of traditional religion.

Here’s a few quotes:

But perhaps one of the most alluring aspects of [this] approach to spirituality is *the absence of any rules...*, [T]he aim is to tackle big puzzles like the meaning of life and how to live “a more present, connected and ignited life.”

Ms. Carroll acknowledges that this type of spirituality, which focuses on adopting whatever practices and beliefs make sense to each individual, can be construed as convenient or cherry-picking.

[But]... this brand of spirituality, and the message it advocates, is a natural product of the times. “There’s a way to blend the objectives of capitalism with spirituality. You can have it all... and be an authentic person with a meaningful life,” she says. “This isn’t just about this type of spirituality. This is about our culture. Our whole culture is wrapped up in this endeavour.”

It certainly is. The idea of a meaningful life of spirituality on our own terms, without any demands for repentance or change has always been popular.

Yet our texts this morning will not allow us the luxury of protesting against big realities without also examining and acknowledging our own role in the brokenness of our world.

Advent turns our hearts and minds and hands and feet to a new reality – and this new reality challenges both the world **as it is** and us **as we are**.

The world is not as it should be – we know this very well, and we see evidence of it in big protest movements around the world.

But we are not as we should be either, and the Advent season – a season which was historically one of penitence and preparation – is meant to remind us of this.

Last week, I said that a large part of the Christian life is living into realities that aren’t yet as real as they will be.

Perhaps a metaphor will help.

I have not been a pastor for very long and have only done a handful of weddings, but even in my limited experience, I have been struck by the profound difference between a good wedding and a good marriage.

Young couples go to *extraordinary* lengths to ensure that their big day is perfect. They scour magazines and websites and wedding trade shows and exhibitions to find the perfect decorations, the perfect hall, the perfect dress, the perfect flowers, photographer, and on and on the list goes.

Yet even in the very few weddings that I have done, I have noticed that not long after the day itself, the young couple demonstrates that they have not put *nearly* as much thought or effort into their *marriage* as they did into their wedding.

Frequently, their behaviour and their struggles leads to the conclusion that they are unable or unwilling to make the changes necessary to live according to the new reality created or symbolized by their wedding day.

I wonder if the same is true for us, as followers of Jesus. Christians make a lot of Christmas, and rightly so. Along with Easter, these are these two seasons symbolize the most important events in the Christian year – Jesus' incarnation and Jesus' death and resurrection.

But what about the rest of the year? Are we living into/according to the new reality that these special seasons point to and make possible? Or do we do the equivalent of investing all of our resources into "the wedding" while ignoring the more important question of how we will make "a marriage?"

Weddings only last a day. Christmas only comes once a year. But marriages can last a lifetime.

And a life of discipleship – a commitment to live according to the new reality of what God is doing in and for the world through Jesus – also takes a lifetime.

So what can we learn from Isaiah's call and Mark's proclamation of John the Baptist as the one preparing the way in the wilderness for the coming king? What is the word of the Lord to us, today, on this second Sunday of Advent 2011?

Mark and Isaiah belong together. Both speak about news coming out of the wilderness.

"The wilderness" is a prominent theme found throughout Scripture. From the Israelites journey out of Egypt to the land of Canaan to the "wilderness" experience of exile during the time of the prophets, to John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, to Jesus' own temptation – the wilderness is a place of testing, a place of purification, of trial and rebellion.

Ultimately, the wilderness is a place of exodus, liberation, freedom, and new life.

Isaiah's message is one of comfort for a beleaguered people suffering in the "wilderness" of exile. It is a reminder that their God will one day lift up every valley, that the ground will become level and smooth.

These are geological metaphors that speak about God lifting the lowly and humbling the proud. They speak about no more reasons for protest – about their being enough for all, about no more huge gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and the weak, about sin and selfishness no longer determining the shape of our reality.

This is good news for those who are used to being on the losing side, those used to things not going their way. It is good news for those used to being the victims of the big and the powerful.

But Isaiah's voice needs to be heard alongside Mark's. **Mark** reminds us that the voice in the wilderness signaling the coming of God is also a call for taking self-inventory and repenting for all of the ways that our lives do not match what God is seeking to accomplish in his world.

It is a call to repent for the ways in which our greed and complacency, our impatience and failure to love the way we are called to, our idolatry, and our violence and faithlessness contribute to the pain and brokenness of our world.

Mark's voice reminds us that Advent is not a prolonged shopping season with colourful lights and pleasant Christmas music, and heartwarming winter scenes, but one that has historically been a time of *penitence*.

Advent isn't just a kind of preamble to Christmas. It is a time to ask searching questions of ourselves, and to once again commit ourselves to Jesus' way of living in a world that still waits for its redemption to be complete.

Perhaps this morning you see yourself in Isaiah's words of comfort for people who are used to being on the wrong side of the score. Perhaps life has kicked you around over the past while and you are staggering towards Christmas this year.

If so, Isaiah's words are for you:

"Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Or perhaps, this Advent season Mark's call rings truer. Perhaps you could use a reminder that Advent is about changing the landscape – both in the world, and in your own life.

Perhaps we could all use an invitation to ponder the crooked and uneven places in our own lives that could use straightening as we prepare the way for Jesus this Advent season.

Isaiah's and Mark's call are not two different calls. They are all part of the same call – the same Advent reality of a God who comes to rescue his broken and hurting world, his broken and hurting children.

The same reality of a God who comes to save us **from** sin and evil, and to save us **for** a life of love and service to others.

May God use this Advent season to continue to refine us and make us people of peace, justice, love, and hope.

Amen.

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