

LifeGroup Study

Date: December 10, 2023

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

Theme: Here With Us...To Call Us Back

Belong

The Christmas season is a time of preparation. We clean our houses, purchase gifts, decorate our homes with symbols of the season—all in anticipation of the celebration that is Christmas. While the preparation can get overwhelming and distracting, there is something within that grabs us and moves us to take time to reflect on the spirit of the season. It could be the fragrant smell of all the cooking, or the traditions we keep each year, or simply seeing the symbols of the season all around us. It's at that point where everything else seems to fall away and our hearts become energized with the love that comes from the One who created us.

This week's text points us back to the One who gave us life and reminds us that we are never out of God's thoughts. God lets us know that no matter how far we stray, we have the ability to prepare our hearts so that we may reconnect with God's love. Advent is a time that reminds us of that first Christmas and God calling us back—not just during this time but each and every day.

Prayer... Heavenly Father, we come to you today to get a deeper understanding of how we can return to you in the midst of our daily lives. During this time of year we sense a stirring inside of us but don't always take time to understand what to do with it. Help us move closer to you so that we may turn those stirrings into actions of love every day. Amen.

Believe

Read Isaiah 40:1-11. Isaiah lived in the late eighth century BC in the southern kingdom of Judah and prophesied through the reign of many kings. The 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah are typically broken into two main sections, but should be looked at as a whole to see the continuity. Although the first 39 chapters center on Isaiah's prophecies of doom for all nations that are against God and aimed at Isaiah's own kingdom of Judah, looking deeper uncovers a constant reassurance from God to not be afraid. In the midst of very difficult times, God still gave them (and us!) reassurance.

•*Have you felt afraid when facing difficult times? Where did you feel God was at those times? Did you feel reassurance?*

Starting with chapter 40, referred to as the "Book of Comfort," the book takes a turn to one of forgiveness, comfort, and hope. This text starts at the point where Jerusalem had already been destroyed and the Israelites sent into exile. Things couldn't have looked bleaker, however, instead of staying quiet and letting the Israelites feel the pain of their deserved exile, God chooses to speak words of comfort and encouragement.

•*Why do you think God chose to respond with compassion? Have you felt God's compassion during difficult times? How did you respond?*

God continues by asking the very people who turned away to come back; God is welcoming them with open arms.

•*How does this relate to us today? Do you think God is calling us back? From where are we coming back?*

Read Mark 1:1-8. The book of Mark, although the shortest of the four gospels, is generally thought to be the earliest written. This text starts out simply by stating that this is the beginning of the gospel or good news about Jesus Christ. Looking back at the Isaiah text we see that the term gospel is used when Isaiah refers to the "good tidings" of God's grace. The Isaiah text is also specifically used by Mark to reference John the Baptist as "a voice of one calling in the desert." This reference links John the Baptist to Isaiah's prophecy by showing that he is fulfilling the prophecy as the one preparing the way for Jesus.

•*How was John preparing the way for Jesus?*

In John the Baptist's time, baptism was done for non-Jews when they converted to Judaism, but John baptized both Jews and Gentiles—aiming his message of repentance at everyone. By baptizing both Jews and Gentiles, John the Baptist was giving new meaning and a visible symbol for a person who had opened their hearts to ask for forgiveness and accept God's invitation. He turned it into a sign of repentance, preaching that it was only a symbol and that true forgiveness would come from the One for whom he was preparing the way.

•*What is repentance? How does it call us back to God? What does John mean when he says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit? How does that relate to us today?*

Become

When our lives get busy, it is very easy to get distracted or even overwhelmed and put God on the back burner. It's something that is not intentional but happens as we try to survive the frenetic pace of our lives. As in ancient times when John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, God's message is still pointing us to the One who saves us by encouraging us to prepare our hearts to allow God's Spirit within us to guide our lives.

The next time you feel the pressure of daily life and get that overwhelming feeling of not being able to handle everything that is coming at you, take a step back and take a few deep breaths. Then clear your mind, turn toward God through prayer, and you will find God waiting with open arms. As you allow God's Spirit to guide your life, you will connect to the passions placed on your heart, moving you to act with love and compassion for others.

Prayer... Lord God, thank you for your patience and willingness to keep calling us back to you. Forgive us for our sin. Equip us for your work here on earth. Unleash the passions you've given us to change the world in your name. Draw us to you. Amen.