

“Winter Weather’ Advisory”

Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 40:1-5

2nd Sunday of Advent: Love

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

“Winter Weather Advisory.” The news went out this past Monday. Our area was to get 3-5 inches of wet snow Monday night and early Tuesday morning. Maybe more snow north of here. Where: Portions of east central Ohio and western Pennsylvania. Impact: Slippery road conditions that will impact the Tuesday morning commute. Urgency: Take action and plan ahead. Issued by: The National Weather Service. Did you see the “Weather Advisory?”

And, indeed, we did wake up Tuesday morning with 4-5 inches of wet snow. I was happy to look out my window and see it. It was beautiful on trees and bushes and roofs, before it was plowed and shoveled, before there were any tracks in it. It’s a like a “blanket of peace and quiet” settles down on us. And I was glad for the “Weather Advisory.”

Growing up in the mountains in NE Washington State, I grew up with snow in the winter. We usually had snow early December through March. You just learned to live with it and travel in it. By February I was tired of it. But in December I welcomed the snow. I still do. And I welcome the “Winter Weather Forecast.”

Not everyone welcomes the “Winter Weather Advisory.” If you have to drive somewhere it can be concerning. The events and projects you planned can just go “sideways.” And I don’t worry about driving in snow. But I do worry about other drivers. We often change our plans with a “Winter Weather Advisory.” Or at least pay a little more attention to the weather.

II. Texts and Brief Exegesis

The words of the prophet Isaiah burst on the scene as a type of “winter weather advisory,” God’s “weather advisory.” The “weather” was changing. We hear part of the “forecast” in our text from Isaiah 40.

In 586 BCE, Israel fell to the Babylonians. Jerusalem, the palace, and the temple were all razed. Vineyards were burned. Flocks of sheep and herds of cattle were killed. Homes and shops were destroyed. Anything of value was stolen. Many died in the Babylonian conquest. And those who survived were taken away to Babylon. Only the poorest of the poor, the old, and the sick were left to fend for themselves. Life had become rubble. It was a devastating “storm.” And most

people had ignored the “weather advisory” from the prophets in the years before. But “God’s weather” comes anyway.

And so 50 years go by. The Jews settled into their lives in Babylon. Most of those who lived in Jerusalem before the fall died in Babylon. A new generation arises. They have heard the stories and songs and poems of Jerusalem and the temple, but they only know Babylon. Jerusalem seems like a strange, distant land.

And it’s then that the words of the prophet Isaiah burst on the scene in Babylon. It’s a “weather advisory.” Things are changing. A storm is brewing. God is on the move. The purposes of God are on the move. The salvation of God is on the move. Pay attention. Get ready.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...she has served her term...her penalty is paid. A voice cries in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain shall be made low. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people will see it together. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:1-5)

It’s a “Winter Weather Advisory.” The salvation of God is coming. A way will be made for the Jewish captives in Babylon to return to their land and their lives and their faith. And some paid attention to Isaiah’s “weather forecast.” They were ready. So when Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return home, they left. They made the long trip home.

But others had settled into Babylonian life. They became comfortable in a foreign land. They embraced the culture and the language and the religion. Babylon had become their home. They weren’t looking for a change. The old stories of God and Jerusalem mattered less. So they ignored Isaiah’s “weather advisory.” And when the “storm” came, they just stayed put. They did not return. They missed the salvation of God. And they never knew any difference.

Some people pay attention to a “weather advisory.” And others don’t. It’s still that way.

If Isaiah is a “weather advisory” then John the Baptist is a tornado blown in from the desert. Here’s our second reading on this 2nd Sunday of Advent:

Read Matthew 3:1-12.

There is nothing cuddly, cozy, and comfortable about John the Baptist. His strange clothes and ascetic diet mark him as a prophet. No one has seen or heard anyone like him for generations. And like the prophets before him, Elijah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, he sees what religion and power and politics do not. He knows the weather is changing. It is a “Winter Weather Advisory.” The time for the kingdom of God is at hand. God’s plan and salvation are on the way. The days of God’s Savior are coming.

This does not mean “business as usual.” This is not a benign “sunny and 70.” No, this is a storm. Get ready. Be prepared. Repent. To “repent” is “to turn.” It’s “to turn” from attitudes and actions and ways of life that oppose God’s kingdom. It’s “to turn” from greed and violence and

vanity and self-righteousness. And it's "to turn" to God's way of life. It's "to turn" to generosity, kindness, humility, faithfulness and love. Repent. Get ready. Pay attention.

And some people do pay attention. They come to the wilderness by the Jordan River to hear the "storm warning" for themselves. John's person and message are compelling. And it's not just about repentance. It's also about baptism. The symbol of inward cleaning, repentance, is combined with the outward symbol of cleaning, baptism. Many heed his warning. They get ready. They repent and are baptized.

And John knows something else. He knows the "warning" is not the "storm." He knows repentance and baptism only prepare people for what's coming. He baptizes with water. It is only temporary. But the one who comes, the one who brings the kingdom of God, the one who is the Savior...that one will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And that baptism in the Holy Spirit will bring change from the inside out and "burn away" all that is not the kingdom of God. It is a "Winter Weather Advisory."

Like the message of the prophet Isaiah this morning, some people will pay attention. They will get ready. They will look for the "change in the weather" and believe in the Messiah and God's kingdom. And others will not. They will just go on with their lives and ignore the warning. They will dismiss John the Baptist as interesting, but not practical. He's been out in the desert a little too long. They like believing it will always be "sunny and 70." And they will miss the plan and salvation of God.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

Our Presbyterian tradition, and many Christian traditions, recommend that the Advent season should begin with John the Baptist. And, very honestly, it's "jarring." This 2nd Sunday of Advent is designated as "the Advent Sunday of Love." We light the 2nd Advent Candle, the Candle of Love. We have "Love" on the front of our bulletins. Love just naturally seems to fit in this season of preparation for Christmas; share and show a little more love. It's comfortable.

But John the Baptist is not comfortable. Not if we take him seriously; not if we listen carefully; not if we believe he tells the truth; the "storm is coming." And so I wondered about that this week. Maybe you are wondering about that now. How does John the Baptist fit in our Advent season of preparation?

Very honestly, for most people, I don't think he fits at all. And maybe that's the point. John the Baptist "blows in from the desert" to tell us again that God's kingdom and Savior are breaking into the world, and preparation for that is not lives "filled to the brim" with shopping and parties and long "to do" lists. John shouts above all the business of Christmas to tell our weary hearts what we hope is true: a change is coming. Repent, get ready, pay attention.

As I was reading our Advent devotional, *Celebrating Abundance*, I think author Walter Brueggemann also says what John is saying:

“What do we do while we watch and wait this Advent season? Our Advent work should be about decreasing and increasing: Decrease what is greedy, what is frantic consumerism, for the increase of simple, life-giving sharing; decrease what is fearful and defensive, for the increase of life-giving compassion and generosity; decrease what is false and dishonest for the increase of truth-telling about you, your neighbor, and justice in our world; decrease what is hateful and alienating, for the increase of healing and forgiveness, which are the only sources of life.” (p. 13).

What would it mean for us to repent, be baptized, get ready, pay attention for the coming of God’s kingdom and Savior this Advent season? Is it “sunny and 70?” Or do you hear the “Winter Weather Advisory?”

The concept “Tough Love” first appeared in the 60s. It was an approach to parenting that encouraged setting boundaries and taking responsibility. Rather than give a child what he or she always wants in the short term, good parenting requires helping children develop character for the long term. “Tough Love” encourages independence. “Tough Love” tells the truth. “Tough Love” says “no” sometimes. It became a way for addiction recovery and counseling and workplace leadership.

It seems to me that when we put John the Baptist and the 2nd Sunday of Advent together, we get “Tough Love.” If severe weather is coming, I don’t need to hear “sunny and 70.” I need to hear about the “winter storm.” I might like “sunny and 70,” but what I need to hear is the truth.

It’s the season of Advent. God’s Savior and God’s kingdom are coming again. Pay attention. Get ready. Repent and be baptized. It’s a “Winter Weather Advisory.” And strangely it is also a word of “love.”