

## **“A New You”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
December 10, 2023 - Second Sunday of Advent

[Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8](#)

Have you sent out your holiday cards yet? I know some of you have, as Christine and I have received some from church members along with those that have started to arrive from old friends, current and former co-workers, and, as always, the one from the realtor who worked with us when we bought our house several years ago (probably hoping that we keep him in mind in case may be considering having him sell our house in the coming new year, which we are not!). Some of the cards we've received include a family photo; some have pictures of just the children and/or pets. Some include an annual family news update; others offer just a simple holiday greeting. Many of these cards wish us a merry Christmas, or to be blessed in the new year, or just to enjoy the holiday season, but none of the cards that we've received this year, or ever, have included a wish specifically for Advent.

Could you imagine what an Advent card might look like or what it might say? Perhaps it would include an image of some of the characters who appear in our Advent scripture lessons, like John the baptizer wearing his coat of camel hair while munching on a honey-drizzled locust, or one of the similarly unusual prophets of ancient Israel or Judah. I imagine they might include a seasonal wish, such as “Hoping your valleys are lifted up!” or “Expect more light to shine soon!” or “Wishing you a season full of confession and repentance!” OK, so maybe that's why Advent calendars counting down the days until Christmas are still somewhat familiar, but Advent greeting cards are just not a thing.

But I would love it if they were. For the messages of Advent, that Christ is coming, that more light will shine soon, that the valleys will be lifted up, and that we should repent and live as God intends, if we take them to heart, can help us to experience more of God's gifts of love, joy, peace, and hope, and isn't this what we desire for those we love, and our co-workers, and our real estate agents? Indeed, this is what we wish for all the world's people.

When we look at the direction that we are heading as a human family, which is unmistakable if you pay attention just for a moment to the news of the day and consider what people around the world are experiencing, we see that in so many ways we are moving down paths that lead us away from goodness and light. And many of us may not need to look outside of your own hearts to feel that we are in a dark valley or are heading to one. Advent is a season for us to consider the movement of our lives and to repent, or turn, from ways of living that lead us away from God and the blessings of love, joy, peace, and hope that God desires for us to enjoy. Advent is a season for turning towards light and life.

Turning towards light and life certainly were the desire of those who first received the message of the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah that we heard in today's scripture lesson. The words we heard come from the beginning of the second part of the book of Isaiah, and they were offered by the prophets to the children of Israel at a time of exile. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah, likely written 150 years or so before today's text, offered words of warning, that destruction was coming due to the people's unfaithfulness to their God. With the conquest of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the removal of so many of the people from Israel and Judah, the warnings of Isaiah were realized. Another author or authors offered today's words to the people of Israel as they lived in a dark, deep valley as captives in Babylonia, living there without hope for a future as a people. And so the prophet offers a word of comfort and hope, that though suffering in exile, they were not abandoned by God, but would be enabled by God to return to where their ancestors worshipped. They would again be gathered by their mighty but tender God, and be led by God out of their wilderness of exile to a where they, as God's beloved flock, would graze again together in peaceful pastures.

By the time of Jesus, many of Israel's children had indeed returned to Palestine and their temple was rebuilt, but most of the flock did remained scattered throughout the Roman Empire. By the time the gospel of Mark was written, the temple was once again destroyed, Jerusalem was once more in ruins, and Jewish people came to be dispersed more than ever. To people once more living under the weight of an oppressive, destructive empire, the gospel writer offers a message of good news, that a savior has come into the world to set people free,

to baptize with a Spirit that unites people of God's flock and enables them to worship in spirit and truth, wherever they may live.

This message remains true for us today. God, who renewed Israel again and again, continues to renew people by God's Spirit. God continues to pour forth new light into the world. God still calls people to repent and turn towards the light that they may have more life. This Advent, my wish for you is that you would turn more towards God's light. My hope for the world is that our human family can turn from the destructive ways of empire-building and instead to be about the work of making a new world in which those who are living in the valleys are lifted and those who are on the heights freely share of their over-abundance to realize this dream of God for us. This Advent, let us pay attention to God's vision for the world, and let us turn our lives to the path that leads towards the realization of this vision. As you turn, may there be a new you, and as we turn together, may the world begin again and be full of heaven's peace and joy. Amen.