**Closer to Jesus, further from Sin**

**By Jeff McDowell**

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Sermon theme: The ancient call of Isaiah was to get ready for the Savior by turning 180 degrees from sin and toward God. Good works accompany a sinner who turns, and justice results from a commitment to doing right by God. John the Baptizer came also with a message of turning away from sin and toward God. These actions get us ready for the Savior to enter our lives. How do we respond to these calls today? **First,** acknowledge the patterns of your own behavior which have moved you far away from God and / or harmed others. Be honest with yourself and confess it to God with sorrow in your heart. **Second,** accept God’s forgiveness fully: do not keep beating yourself up. Instead, when you know Jesus died for you to save you from your sins, receive that and let your regrets go. **Third,** commit to live for Jesus Christ with small daily acts, making a difference in the world. Our privilege this month is getting closer to Jesus. We Can Do It!

**Scriptures:**

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
    says your God.
2Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
    and cry to her
that she has served her term,
    that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
    double for all her sins.

3***A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,***
    make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4Every valley shall be lifted up,
    and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
    and the rough places a plain.
5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
    and all people shall see it together,
    for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’

6A voice says, ‘Cry out!’
    And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’
All people are grass,
    their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7The grass withers, the flower fades,
    when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
    surely the people are grass.
8The grass withers, the flower fades;
    but the word of our God will stand for ever.
9Get you up to a high mountain,
    O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
    O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
    lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
    ‘Here is your God!’
10See, the Lord God comes with might,
    and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
    and his recompense before him.
11He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
    he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
    and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good newsof Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
    who will prepare your way;
3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
    “Prepare the way of the Lord,
    make his paths straight”’,

4John the baptizer appearedin the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you withwater; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

These ancient stories remain just that, stories far away and long ago, unless we make the effort to see God and ourselves in them. What is it that will make them come alive to us and make a difference in our lives?

***The quest to follow Jesus, today.***

We are not geared to follow. Most of our lives we are in charge, setting our own path, going our own way. But at some point, if we are lucky, God intervenes and calls us to himself.

This month, this season of advent, we are coming closer to Jesus. Like the wise men of old we are following the signs in the heavens to worship the king of kings.

But wait, there are wars and rumors of wars. There is pain and suffering and greed and hatred. More than Ever, the world needs Jesus, Prince of Peace.

Lets look again at these ancient stories and see if we find ourselves in them.

The ancient call of Isaiah was to get ready for the Savior by turning 180 degrees from sin and toward God. Good works accompany a sinner who turns, and justice results from a commitment to doing right by God. John the Baptizer came also with a message of turning away from sin and toward God. These actions get us ready for the Savior to enter our lives. How do we respond to these calls today? **First**, acknowledge the patterns of your own behavior which have moved you far away from God and / or harmed others. Be honest with yourself and confess it to God with sorrow in your heart. **Second,** accept God’s forgiveness fully: do not keep beating yourself up. Instead, when you know Jesus died for you to save you from your sins, receive that and let your regrets go. **Third,** commit to live for Jesus Christ with small daily acts, making a difference in the world. Our privilege this month is getting closer to Jesus. We Can Do It!

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1. **First**, acknowledge the patterns of your own behavior which have moved you far away from God and / or harmed others. Be honest with yourself and confess it to God with sorrow in your heart.

Last Sunday I walked away from the communion table, demonstrating how close or how far away we feel from Jesus. Today I want to explore that a little more and ask you to assess your own walk, in terms of sin. Decisions, habits and trends of behavior in your own life can move you toward or away from Jesus. Anything that you put before God is an idol in comparison. We don’t often in America see people hand – carving gods to bow down and worship, but we certainly have our share of idols we bow to: greed, possessions, money, status, privilege. God checks us and sees if we are ready to leave it all behind to follow, like Isaiah’s call to prepare the way of the Lord, making His path’s straight. What is it in your life that is not straight, that is tripping you up or making you wander from God? The call is to repent, to turn around and go in the opposite direction, right toward God.

1. **Second,** accept God’s forgiveness fully: do not keep beating yourself up. I’ve seen a trend in Christian circles of some people who cannot forgive themselves, therefore cannot allow God to fully forgive them of sin. They come to church, they come to God but cannot let go of the enormity of what they have done in the past, and feel unworthy of love, grace, forgiveness, mercy and peace. They live in constant turmoil, hoping to repay God for their sins but knowing they can never fully repay God. Some may feel that one or two sins they committed at some point in their life can never be forgiven. Others believe they are unique sinners, too far away from God for God to notice them. But listen to what God say about you:

**“Whoever comes to me, I will in no wise cast out.**

**“Come unto me, all you who work hard and are burdened with heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”**

**“As far as the East is from the West, so far I will remove your sins from you.”**

**“Though your sins be red like scarlet, I will make when white as snow.”**

**And Today’s reading, “you have already received double punishment for all your sins.”**

Sometimes the punishment is a result of our sins, they naturally cause trouble in this world and we live with the consequences. This is true for many in prison, whose crimes caught up with them. Still, prison ministry is based on the forgiveness of Christ available to all sinners.

Prayers of confession in the early church at the communion table end with “In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.” “Thanks be to God.”

Can you, those of you who do not yet feel totally forgiven, come closer to Jesus just to see what He will do with your sins?

Christ came into the world to save sinners. To all who would accept Him he gave the gift of eternal life.

Count your sins, list them now before God, be honest with God and God will be honest with you. And God says, “whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.”

There is a practice among early Christian monks called self – flagellation. It means a believer would punish themselves for their sins by taking it out on their own body, to show God how serious they are about faith. But God does not want that. God wants us to know that on the cross, the Son of God Himself, took all our punishment for all sins for all time in his body, and overcame that suffering and death by rising on the third day.

Romans 5:6-8: *“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

Are you punishing yourself to show God how serious you are? ***Stop it.*** God does not want that. God wants to have you simply turn away from sin and toward Jesus again. Jesus is the savior of the world, and of you. You… Are... Forgiven!

1. **Third,** commit to live for Jesus Christ with small daily acts, making a difference in the world.