

**God's Recycled Word**  
Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

Recycled products are everywhere these days. The paper I've printed this sermon on contains at least 30% recycled material. Most of the products we throw in the recycling bin – steel and aluminum cans, cardboard, paper, plastics and glass, themselves contain a high percentage of recycled products. And recycling makes good sense. Why should we make products such as plastics that are largely impervious to decay and then throw them into landfills where they will never turn to earth, or burn them in incinerators that will release a cloud of toxic chemicals to float down upon us all? Or why should we use highly toxic chemicals and pollute our rivers and streams with them when they can be reused without hurting the environment? Thankfully that's the case today with car batteries. 99% of which are recycled – the most recycled product in America.

A prophet amongst the exiled Hebrew people living in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century before Christ proclaimed, “*the grass withers and the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever.*” He then proclaimed a very specific word from God of comfort and freedom for his people living in captivity and exile in Babylon. Well, what happens to that eternal Word once it has been spoken? Does it end up just sitting in a heavenly library only to be remembered, but never to be used again? No! In God's economy that eternal Word continues in use. But that same Word gets recycled.

*A voice cries out: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

With the simple change of a comma Mark describes John the Baptist as “*the voice of one in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*” Where Isaiah's Word was proclaimed **to** the wilderness, John the Baptist's Word was simply proclaimed **in** the wilderness. It's the same Word, but it is used in a different historical context in a different way. The eternal Word of God that sets captives free and proclaims the good news about how God will help us be connected to his deliverance is recycled yet again in Jesus himself. Jesus is himself the Word made flesh. In his very person Jesus embodies that eternal Word. But now instead of proclaiming a way in the wilderness or a way of repentance Jesus himself is *the way, the truth and the life.*

The eternal *Word* of God proclaimed in all three contexts is a Word of good news and hope about setting captives free. The Hebrew people in the 6<sup>th</sup> Before Christ were captives – refugees living 500 miles as the crow flies but over thousand miles as a caravan route meandered, from their homeland. Only a few older people living among them could even remember what that homeland looked like; all the rest had been born in captivity. The Babylonians destroyed Judah, toppled the walls of Jerusalem and burned the city. They looted the sacred vessels of gold, silver and bronze from the Temple where God was worshipped. The Temple itself was destroyed. And the people were led away in chains the long way across the dessert to Babylon.

Now a new power was on the rise – Persia (modern day Iran *talk about recycling history!*) and their mighty king Cyrus were on their way to conquer the Babylonian Empire, making it a Persian Empire. What would become of the Hebrew people exiled so far from home? They had kept their faith, their belief in the living God, their sacred

writings and in fact revitalized their practice of keeping God's Law. The Prophet, historians call *Second Isaiah* whose words are recorded in Isaiah 40-55, received God's eternal Word amongst those terrified exiles and proclaimed comfort and good news. God had not forgotten his people. Indeed their time of suffering and exile was at an end. In the very regime change that looked so terrifying God was making a sacred way for them to return to their homeland.

John the Baptist in around 30 AD picked up Isaiah's word and applied it in a new context. Who was John? He was the voice of one shouting himself hoarse in the desert trying to get God's people to *prepare the way of the Lord*. Why should they need to prepare the way of the Lord? To prepare for the Messiah to come. The reason why people at that time were so desperate for the Messiah to come was their captivity. This time they were not living in exile, but they were living in captivity all the same. This time the Romans were their overlords. And they longed to be free as a nation and a people to practice their faith and serve their God.

The way John proclaimed was not a path in the wilderness, not even a way that God was making for them, but rather a way that they, the people, could make for God. They could *prepare the way of the Lord* through repentance. The rough places would be smoothed, the high places leveled and the valleys filled in – in them. Baptism in the Jordan River was a physical sign of their repentance and new life. By turning around from their sins, by purifying their lives and turning in new ways back to God they would prepare the way for God to come to them.

Jesus – the Son of God – who was that Messiah, was in fact already come among them. God had already made his way into their midst, although no one knew it yet. And Jesus' purpose in coming was indeed to set the captives free. Only Jesus' understanding of that freedom from captivity was different from the political notion prevalent at the time. After his baptism and full of the Holy Spirit Jesus returned to his home-town synagogue and read these words from the book of the Prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)*

After he rolled up the scroll of the Prophet and sat down Jesus proclaimed, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

Jesus released captives through healing the sick. Healing those who were suffering, who were paralyzed, who were blind, who were deaf, even restoring life to the dead... Jesus released those captive to physical ailment. He released those in bondage to spiritual captivity. He cast out demons and set people free. Jesus set people free from their sins that kept them from living fully in God's love. First of all he showed them that God loved them by welcoming sinners, by seeking them out and eating with them. He offered them forgiveness and he welcomed them back into the fellowship of God's people.

Ultimately, when Jesus took our place and died for each of us and for all people everywhere upon the cross, he set us free. He set us free from the power of sin and death.

He washed away our sin. He shared our pain. He invited us, through dying with him, the power to be raised with him to eternal life. Jesus set the captives free.

So, how would we recycle that eternal Word of God about God making a way to captives free to our situations, to our captivities, today?

What are some of the overarching captivities of our day and age? One of those captivities that is such a big part of this season is our consumerism. Indeed I think we are possessed by our possessions as much as the other way around. We are possessed by our need to possess, to buy, to own, to have more and more things. As if by things our souls will be satisfied. Another captivity that holds sway in our day is extremism and fundamentalism. When our truth is a cudgel to hit those who do not believe like us, when we would rather shout our own beliefs than sit and listen to another's, we are held captive by our own rigidness. In an atmosphere of intolerance, lack of respect and unwillingness to compromise everyone is held captive.

The same captivities that Jesus addressed can certainly lock us in chains: sin, illness, evil, poverty, intolerance and hypocrisy. All our fears and anxieties can have that same effect.

Today we hear the proclamation that God's Word brings *good news*. God makes a way for us across the wilderness. Jesus is that way and the truth and the life. God's love seeks us out. In Jesus that Word has become flesh and dwelt among us. He has revealed himself in a life that we can understand and relate to. He has taken our human condition and captivity upon himself and thus set the captives free.

John the Baptist's way is also still our way. And that way involves the acknowledgment of our own sins and failings. We need not only to confess but also to repent and turn away from the ways and patterns and practices that lead us away from God's love. For in that confession, in that repentance, in God's forgiveness there is new life. In our repentance God is also making a way and we are preparing the way of the Lord to be exalted in our hearts and lives.

God's eternal Word can be recycled again and again in different times and in different ways. How might that Word of hope and release from captivity be speaking today to you?

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak 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. A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'* (Isaiah 40:1-5)