



Forgiven for Peace

Isaiah 40:1-11; Ps 85:1-2, 8-13; Mar 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Peace is much more than a cease fire of hostilities. Forgiveness is much more than escaping justice. God offers forgiveness, but with the purpose that we receive God's peace. Are we ready to seek God's peace in our lives, according to God's will and definitions?

He came as a herald. He came to prepare his people to receive another of much greater importance than his own. To Mark, John the Baptist's message was key to beginning his narrative and sermon about Jesus. It was the key to Jesus' whole message. As it was necessary to prepare the people before Jesus' arrival, it was also important to prepare his hearers beforehand to listen to the message of Jesus Christ and understand the one of whom Mark was about to write.

John the Baptist came on the scene proclaiming a message of preparation. One would have thought that all were prepared. To be sure, they were anxious for the arrival of Messiah. For years the nation had been in a hopeful turbulence. Many had arisen proclaiming themselves the Messiah who would free the people from Rome's control. Each one had died, and with his death, the nation returned to its anguished expectation over the rising of the true Messiah. They were ready. They were anxious for him to come now! According to their thinking, it was time and they did not wish to wait one week longer. Then came John, preaching that they prepare themselves to receive the One they so awaited.

How could they not be ready for His arrival? Even Rome knew the nation was on the cusp of revolt, waiting only that a leader might arrive to lead them in rebellion against the Roman armies. The people seethed in anticipation and search for the Messiah of *Yahweh*. They were simply looking for a sign that Messiah had come. At least, that is how they saw themselves—ready, prepared. Messiah now!

John had a different perspective. His was the take of a prophet like Isaiah, who spoke of the need to make preparations of a different category prior to the coming of Messiah. The people were more concerned with the second part of his message. Their eyes were focused on their vision of the result of the promise—the peace and serenity of the nation under God's Messianic provision. They saw a future without Roman oppression. They saw a life free of the imposition of foreign taxes. They saw a religious tranquility where there was no more need to protect themselves from external demands. They did not consider responsibility before God to be the means of their liberation. They thought of themselves, and not of being God's provision for others amid their difficulties.

John did not think Messiah would not be a political leader. He did not have the idea that Messiah would not be a general. He still believed as others that Messiah would free the nation with a political solution. John understood, however, that the first step in seeing God's liberation was an ethical and moral preparation of true justice and equity. To live in preparation required seeing first to the needs of others, and not personal advancement. Justice and righteousness were the beginning of accepting and preparing for God's redemption. One needed to prepare Messiah's way.

John said that those who would experience the promise of God's redemption must first begin with repentance and conversion to serve God's purposes, no longer their own. This was why he came preaching baptism. It was not a question of getting wet. It was not a question of the correct formula or true mode of a rite. The important thing was the message of baptism. It was a demonstration of the

conversion of one's life. It was a new beginning for life, now seeking to fulfill God's objectives, instead of one's own.

The people knew baptism. It was a ritual of conversion for those who were coming to Judaism. It was an act for those who were far from God, serving idols, enmeshed in witchcraft, and not recognizing God's existence as the only Sovereign. It was for those on the outside. John looked within the Jewish people, witnessing that the people were unprepared to receive Messiah, for they remained far from the righteousness and justice of God. Their lives were not centered on God's will, but claiming God's name in vain while continuing down their own paths.

The peace they sought was the wrong peace. They longed for life without foreign political oppression. They sought existence without economic demands counter to their will. They longed for God to clear the way for their egocentric dreams. In truth, God should guarantee their development and make no demand of the people. It should be enough that they accept God's identity, uniqueness, and that there be no mixture of idols in their midst. That they complete certain rituals was fine, but God should grant peace and tranquility while leaving them to seek their fortune and comfort without worrying with the needs of others and God's love for all. Their fantasy was not John's idea at all.

They had not stopped to think seriously about what they asked of God. They thought they were already doing what God wanted. They did not consider others as did God. It was more comfortable to ignore others' needs than get involved with those who needed justice, righteousness, or the provision of material goods. Following God's will demanded preparation for a real peace—peace in the very presence of God.

The people before John did not consider God's presence. They thought of life according to their dreams, the dream of prosperity without worry over finances or health. What we call the American Dream was already part of this nation's desire, for it is the very human dream for to be the ones to hold power over others. Like us, they ignored that this dream does not bring true peace. It brings nothing more than a series of new worries and anxieties. Messianic peace was peace of a wholly other quality. It was the peace of living in the very presence of God. For this, it is necessary that God's righteousness and justice take center stage in our lives.

John preached repentance. John preached a new righteousness. John preached preparation to receive Messiah through bringing about God's justice in our daily actions. Messiah, he said, comes not to immerse us in water, but to introduce us into the very presence of God. The Spirit of the Holy One is the medium of this baptism Messiah brings. He would introduce us into God's very presence, where there is no more living for one's own purposes. In this peace, God's righteousness and justice make their nest. It is where God's love for all reigns supreme, changing our egocentric ambitions into holy ones.

Divine forgiveness proposes fellowship with God. Righteousness proceeds as a path before God, where justice and peace kiss. This salvation is for those who reverence God, not in word, but in deed. Peter spoke of the need to prepare for God's visitation, the return of Jesus Christ in glory. Believers should live with Christ Jesus, where justice and righteousness abide. Are we ready for this peace? Perhaps, we need the kind of conversion of which John preached.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*