Isaiah 40:3-5, Mark 1:1-8

“Is anybody listening?”

 Today we are officially on the other side of the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany season and liturgically this Sunday is called the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. But having said that, how many of you still have your trees up? Me too, I absolutely love having it up. But the day will come when that too has to come down and we will find ourselves in life as usual.

 For us, one sign that we are back to life as normal which isn’t all bad, is that we are back to the sermon series of Walking in His Footsteps. Today we find ourselves with John the Baptist who is thought to have been an essene, which was a group of monastic aesthetics that lived along the caves of the dead sea in a region called Qumran. We went and visited that region which is where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. It was amazing.

 From that rocky, dry, arid desert John comes preaching a message that we find repeated in both of our Scriptures today. The message that God tells us repeatedly in Scripture is that: 1) He is accessible, and 2) his accessibility requires our repentance. What we will find today is that these messages are drowned out in our daily lives because of our inability to hear God clearly.

 We don’t want to believe that God is accessible because that would mean a change to our lives that is more consonant to the direction that God would take us. That direction would the lead us to repentance but we shy away from that because who want to be shown those areas in our lives that have to be changed. This second Sunday of the New Year I encourage you to hear again God’s voice to you today.

 **READ**

 My girls and I had a very interesting discussion this past week, and one unlike we have ever had in the past. Some of you heard about the 18 year old single mom who shot her stalker that had broken into her house. It went viral for a brief period of time last week, but it necessitated my girls to stop and think about if they were in that position what they would do. It shocked me to hear my sweet innocent, now Mennonite educated with a father educated in a Quaker college to hear that maybe, just maybe they would have done the same thing and pulled that trigger, if it was to save their baby.

 There seems to be a general public reaction that is not dissimilar at all to this opinion. But what stuck with me throughout this week is how much of the conversation has revolved around what is the right or wrong thing to do in that scenario. I haven’t heard anyone discussing why this situation had arisen in the first. Why is our society and culture in a state where people are stalking teenage moms so that these very young women have to make decisions that they should never have to be making.

 We are in the political season and it is normally around this time of year, or at least in this season that I hear that same tired cry that the United States is losing its Christian way. Our Scripture today speak about us having lost our ability to listen to God in Scripture, who if we would listen, is telling us something very different from what the rest of society or culture is saying. Our Scriptures today speak God’s voice that reminds us how to live so that the decisions that we make will not put us in a situation where we have to make a choice between the lesser of two evils, but rather naturally follow God’s desires.

 My interest is not so much as to whether the nation has lost its Christianity, but rather whether the church continues to reflect Christ in its actions and how it deals with its neighbor, and if that is the case then the nation will follow suit. I blame the churches if we think the US is losing its Christian milieu, because the churches lost it first. We stopped listening to the God’s voice.

 Let’s look at Isaiah. The main point of Isaiah is that it reminds the reader that God is accessible. The way to God that is a part of our life has to be prepared. We will find a straight path to God through the desert. Any high ground will be made low, any low ground will be made high. Those places that are uneven will be made level, and the rough places will be made smooth.

 Our ability to access God, Isaiah states, will become a reality. There will be no obstacle in our way. Now, remember that Isaiah is a prophet who says that this will happen, meaning that it will happen in the future. We know very well that what he said would happen, did happen in Jesus Christ. God is with us and in fact became one of us. God has become in Jesus Christ completely accessible. There is nothing in your life that should be able to get in the way of a direct relationship between you and God.

 How do we know this is true? Because verse 5 says that God said so. Our greatest obstacle to having access to God are those obstacles that we create. Yesterday, I met with the future leaders of your church. I said to them that it is a requirement for all of the leaders of the church to be disciplined in the study of Scripture and prayer. Every single one of them has to read and pray for at least 5 minutes every single day.

 We say we are too busy because we don’t’ listen to God’s promise that we have direct access to him. We say we have other priorities because we don’t hear what God tells us in Isaiah that he has already laid out for us a different way of life. God has told us, if we would listen, that he is accessible.

 Now in Mark we also find degrees of accessibility. John the Baptist in some ways was one of the least accessible people that we know. We find in the Gospel of Mark his version of the nativity. No angels, shepherds, or camels and kings not even a baby in a manger, no baby at all in fact. Just this very stark title in verse 1: The beginning of the Gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At least we know about whom we are talking. It is from this phrase that we get the title of the first 4 books of the New Testament being called the Gospels. This is why the Gospel is seen as the Good News. That is the literal translation.

 John the Baptist comes as the embodiment of the fulfillment of the Isaiah Scripture. He is the messenger that is called to prepare the way of the Lord. But to be honest, he is just kind of plain weird. You know, we all have those in our family that we don’t try to let out much, we try to keep them hidden. They are just a little bit different from the rest of those around us. John was Jesus’ weird cousin.

 He grew up and lived with a bunch of monks in the desert, he dressed in camel’s hair, was a vegetarian, if you don’t count the whole locust thing. Not real sure about that. But if you look at the Scripture more carefully John exactly fits the bill for the one whom Scripture states will proclaim and announce the time when God will be perfectly accessible. If you look at II Kings 1:8, you hear that John’s dress was actually standard issue for prophets: Elijah is described as: “a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist.” And again in Zechariah 13:4 we read that the “prophets will not put on a hairy mantle to deceive” the people into thinking they were true prophets of the Lord. Because, it seems that is what true prophets of the Lord wore after all.

 John tells people that the time for God to be perfectly accessible is at hand. The amazing thing about all of this, is that the people actually do listen back then. He came proclaiming the arrival of Jesus and that the people had to be prepared for his arrival with repentance. The people came out in droves from not only the Judean hillsides which were very close to the dead sea and to where John would have set up his shop, to even from Jerusalem itself. People were willing to travel to hear the message of accessibility of God from John. But he still wasn’t really one of them.

 Jesus, on the other hand. Was one of them. He was totally accessible. People liked to hang out with him. He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton because he spent so much time with the tax collectors, the embezzlers, the prostitutes, those who never dreamed of having access to the Savior, those who thought they weren’t worthy to be in His presence, which is what made Jesus so accessible, their humble view of themselves.

 But both John and Jesus were killed by society. The accessibility of God almost guarantees that society and culture will eventually turn their backs on you. But God’s voice speaks to us clearly in Mark that God’s accessibility requires our repentance. That is John’s message after all.

 This word repentance is an interesting one to look at as well. It is central to what was John’s message and crucial to our understanding of the accessibility of God. In the Greek it means literally a turning away from something. It could be a change in mind, a complete change in direction, or a turning of ourselves and our backs to sin when offered the choice.

 Both of these Scriptures remind us that God has already done all of the work. The valleys of our lives have been raised up. The mountains of our lives that seem impossible to climb have already been laid low. Our repentance, our turning away is necessary in order for us to see this new reality that God has put before us.

 My guess is that most of us continue to live in a way where we find ourselves in peaks and valleys that we are either trying to get over or climb out of. I am here to tell you what Mark calls the Good News, the Gospel message. When Jesus enters our life he makes us clean indeed and what is before us is His future and His reality that is different from the one that we seem to create for ourselves. It is God who has already done the work, but we don’t always find ourselves in a place where we want to hear that message that is coming loud and clear from the Scriptures and from the pulpit today. We think it is up to us to make ourselves worthy before God, when it is God who already has lowered and raised all things.

 This is the second week of the year for us to worship together as a church family. Some important things will soon be happening in the life of this church. Session will be having its retreat which will have more impact upon the future of this church than anything else will. We will promise to listen to God’ voice and then live in that reality for those few days at least. It should be a very different reality than one in which we normally find ourselves.

 Please lift up this church and the leadership as we look to hear God’s voice and then lead you, the congregation, to those places where God is calling us. Often, however, it will demand a turning away, or a repentance in order to fully enjoy the benefits of God’s Good News for our lives. Amen.