

“A New Day”
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[Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8](#)

Author and essayist Barbara Kingsolver writes of a cool October day in the hills of Lorestan Province in Iran, where a lost child was saved in an inconceivable way. If you’ve heard this story before, it bears hearing again. The child’s parents are walking along when the little girl who was watching the children in the little village comes up to them, horrified, and tells them she has lost their baby, who has inconceivably toddled off and cannot be found anywhere.

The parents frantically search, first in their own village, then the rocky outskirts, but the child is nowhere. It is not survivable once darkness comes. It becomes too cold for a baby. He will die of exposure. The parents and the villagers search frantically, eventually searching in the caves and oak woods of the mountainside.

Kingsolver writes: “Another nightfall, another day, and some begin to give up. But not the father or mother, because there is nowhere to go but this, we have all done this, we bang and bang on the door of hope, and don’t anyone dare suggest there’s nobody home.”

Everyone knows the kinds of animals that live in these woods and caves: wild pigs, bears, against which many full grown men will fall, much less a toddler. They enter the next cave, then the next, then the next, when suddenly, a cry is heard. It’s a child’s cry.

“Cautiously they look into the darkness, and ominously, they smell bear. But the boy is in there, crying, alive. They move into the half-light inside the cave, stand still and wait while the smell gets danker and the texture of the stone walls weaves its details more clearly into their

vision. They see the animal, not a dark hollow in the cave wall as they first thought but the dark, round shape of a thick-furred, quiescent she-bear lying against the wall. And then they see the child. The bear is curled around him, protecting him from these fierce-smelling intruders in her cave.”

And then Kingsolver interrupts her storytelling, probably because she knows we’ll have trouble believing this story. She says, “I’ve gone back through news sources from river to tributary to rivulet until I can go no further because I don’t read Arabic or Farsi. This is not a mistake or a hoax; this happened. The baby was found with the bear in her den. He was alive, unscarred, and perfectly well after three days – and well fed, smelling of milk. The bear was nursing the child.”¹

Isaiah prophesied about such a time. A time when the wolf and lamb will live in harmony, the leopard and the goat will, too. A time when the cow and bear will graze together. And, perhaps, a time when a toddler who has wandered off into the unsurvivable wilderness will be saved by a bear.

Isaiah prophesied about the new world that would break in, beginning with the coming of the Messiah. Perhaps Isaiah’s vision wasn’t really just about animals getting along. Perhaps it was about the people, too. We live in such a fractured world, a world of individuals, rather than community. We look for things to separate us, rather than things to bring us together. His skin color is different from mine. Her clothes are different. His family isn’t a “good” family. Her politics are different from mine. His religion is different. Her nationality isn’t the same as mine.

In an oft-told story – true or not, I do not know – there was a woman who lived in a small village in France. Trained as a nurse, she devoted her life to caring for the sick and needy. After many years of kind and selfless service to the village’s families, the woman died. She had no family

¹ <http://www.kingsolver.com/books/excerpts/small-wonder.html>, as referenced by Rev. Chris Joiner

of her own, so the townsfolk planned a beautiful funeral for her, a fitting tribute to the woman to whom so many owed their lives.

The parish priest, however, pointed out that, because she was a Protestant, she could not be buried in the town's Catholic cemetery. The villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for the priest either, because he too had been cared for by the woman during a serious illness. But the canons of the Church were very clear; she would have to be buried outside the fence of the cemetery.

The day of the funeral arrived, and the whole village accompanied the woman's casket to the cemetery, where she was buried--outside the fence. But that night, a group of villagers, armed with shovels, sneaked into the cemetery. They then quietly set to work--moving the fence.

Isaiah prophesied about a time when there would be people willing to move fences, when people wouldn't be willing to wait for the dividing walls to be somehow removed, but they would instead tear down those walls themselves. It's a world we can create. It's a world that the coming Messiah creates through us, if we will be willing participants.

But we have to be willing to hear the message of John the Baptizer. We have to be willing to listen to this smelly guy, wearing camel's hair, and eating locusts and wild honey. We have to be willing to tear down those dividing walls right now to even hear the message that he proclaims. What is it he says? He says, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Cut out this senseless divisiveness. Quit pretending that you are better than one another. Remember that God created each one of us as individuals and we are to rejoice in our diversity. Move all of the nonsense of our lives out of the way so that Jesus can enter. That's what John is calling us to do. Prepare the way: the Messiah is coming – if we will just get out of His way so that He can enter!

And John tells us to repent. It's a word we don't really want to think about this time of year. We are ready for the joyfulness of the celebrations. We are ready for the Christmas caroling and the meals and family gatherings and presents, but John tells us to slow down. First, we've got to prepare the way, and part of that preparation is to ready our own lives. Just as we've got to clean house before our family comes over for a Christmas visit, we have to purify our own lives to be ready for Christ to come.

But haven't we already taken care of that? Haven't we already prayed our prayer of confession and received words of assurance? Yes, but confessing sin is not the same as repenting. Remorse, or feeling sorry for past actions, is not the same as repenting. In recent stories in the news, we've heard some amount of remorse, but as for repenting, time will tell. Repenting is what John called us to, but what does it really mean? The Greek word used here, *metanoia*, means, literally, "to turn, to change, to reverse oneself." *Metanoia* is not a particularly religious word in Greek. It is an ordinary, everyday word for turning around and going the other way. From the word "*metanoia*" we get the word "*metamorphosis*" and there we can sense the power of the word. We are not only changing direction; we are really being made new.

You see, it is possible, even common, to confess a sin, and yet keep right on doing it. That is not repentance. It is possible to even feel real remorse for an action or lack of action and to keep right on doing it. That is not repentance. Repentance is about turning our lives around to live the way God intends for us to live. It is about changing into the people God made us to be. It is about preparing the way of the Lord.

It's about tearing down walls that separate us from the rest of God's children. It's about helping to usher in this new world of which Isaiah spoke, a world where sometimes we'll see toddlers being cared for by bears. But more commonly, we'll see people caring about one another, showing one another God's love, and letting the light of Christ shine through them. A new day is

coming. Maybe it's hard to see sometimes. It is sometimes easier to focus on the bad news coming from our TVs and phones and newspapers than on the good news proclaimed in our Bibles. So, I encourage all of us to spend a little less time in front of the TV and a little more time in your Bible. I encourage us to think about that cave in the mountains of Iran where part of Isaiah's prophecy came true, and I encourage us to allow God to work through us to make the rest of it come true. A new world is on its way. Let us prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.