

December 6, 2020 – Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-14, Mark 1:1-8

Never go to bed angry. It's one of the most common pieces of advice given to newlyweds. Never go to bed angry. It actually has a Biblical origin. Ephesians 4:26 says, “*Do not let the sun go down on your anger.*”

And in general, I think it's a good piece of advice. Because, as Paul was pointing out in that verse, it's easy to let your anger consume you. To let it fester into bitterness and hatred. And very often it begins innocently enough with an argument.

One spouse disagrees with the other spouse. One neighbor disagrees with the other neighbor. One member of the church disagrees with another member of the church. Pretty soon the disagreement becomes heated and intense.

And then, at some point, somebody decides to pull the plug. To end the argument. Not through reconciliation or compromise or forgiveness. But through the silent treatment.

Yes, the silent treatment. When you simply refusing to argue anymore. Walk away. Hang up the phone. Stonewall. It's an incredibly effective tactic during an argument. Because there is no defense against it. You cannot force someone to argue.

But that doesn't mean that the disagreement has gone away. Quite the opposite. The conflict is more intense than ever. It's just never going to be resolved. Not until the two sides begin talking again. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

The Israelites argued with God. A lot. They argued constantly. Israel's very name means, “those who struggle with God.” And I think it could just as easily be translated, “those who argue with God.” Because that was, really, their only way of struggling. As Jacob found out for himself, just before he received that name, you can't physically wrestle God and expect to win.

And, really, you can't argue and expect to win either. But Israel tried. Boy, did they try. Year after year, God sent prophet after prophet to argue with Israel. About everything. How they treated the poor and destitute. How they allowed corruption in the government. How they were sacrificing to false gods on pagan altars. How they had no faith or repentance left in their heart.

But it didn't really work. And Israel ended up sent into Babylonian captivity as their punishment. But not too long after they returned to Israel from exile, they discovered that something else would change.

The prophets disappeared. For 400 years, there was not a single prophet to be found in all of Israel. They're called by many theologians “the silent years.” The years between the Old and New Testaments. When there wasn't anything to write because God had nothing more to say to them.

And the people of Israel felt distinctly like God was giving them the silent treatment. That he had thrown up his hands and stormed out of the house. And that they would never resolve this argument with God. They had crossed the line one too many times. They had struggled with him, argued with him, for the last time. And he was done talking.

They were wrong, of course. And some of them recognized that. Because, truth be told, God had not left His people. Not entirely. He was silent, yes. But even in His silence, He continued to speak. Because His Word was still with them.

They may not have listened the first time, but the words of the prophets already sent to Israel continued to cry out to the people, even though they were long dead and buried. “*The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of our God will stand forever.*” Isaiah himself wrote those words in our Old Testament lesson today. And much of the book of Isaiah is a message to God's people living through those silent years.

No, God had not left His people. Because, simply put, God does not leave his people. Once you are his, you are his forever. And, unlike human beings, who so often storm off and give each other the silent treatment after an argument, God will never leave you. He does not grow stubborn or bitter or consumed with sinful hate.

In fact, quite the contrary. As St Peter also tells us today, God *“is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”* And so He was not done speaking to them. Because He had one more prophet to send.

In some ways, John the Baptist was sent to preach the same old argument as before. Care for the poor. Punish the corrupt. Do away with false gods. Repent and believe.

But in another sense, John was completely different. Because he was the last of the prophets. And his job, more than any other, was to prepare the way of the Lord. To blaze a trail of repentance and faithfulness that Jesus’ entire ministry would follow.

You see, God was silent for all those years, not because he was overwhelmed with hate, sin, and bitterness, like so many of us are when we argue, but because this was part of His plan all along. He needed to show Israel the seriousness of their sin. And he needed to change the argument.

To wake them up to a new possibility. That maybe it doesn’t have to be a constant argument. Maybe it doesn’t have to be a constant cycle of sin and failure, over and over again. Maybe it doesn’t have to be a constant cycle of animals sacrificed and blood shed, over and over again.

Maybe we can be washed in a way that doesn't just leave us just as unclean and unrighteous as we started. A washing that is more than what human hands can offer. More than a symbol of that cycle that our sinful nature will never let us break.

Instead, we can be baptized by one more powerful than any prophet. One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, washing not just our bodies our very souls as well. Working in our hearts in ways that no human will or effort ever could. And breaking that cycle of sin and failure that we could not break. Breaking that cycle of sacrifice and blood shed, by shedding his own blood instead.

Even as John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance, in which sins were confessed and forgiveness by the loving grace of God, he also prepared the way for a new baptism. A mightier baptism. A baptism of salvation.

Apart from all our works and all our sins and all our failures. A baptism that saves. And brings that great comfort to God's people that Isaiah promised. The voice of someone speaking tenderly to them and proclaiming that their warfare is ended, their iniquity is paid for, and they have received from the Lord’s hand double for all their sins.

The voice of someone heralding good news and an end to fear. For the Lord God is no longer silent. He has come in might and his reward is with him. And in the work of Jesus Christ, he has tended his flock like a shepherd. He has gathered the lambs in his arms. He has carried us and led us away from all danger.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. He came to proclaim the end to mankind’s argument with God. An end that came by Jesus Christ coming to earth and winning the argument by losing His life. Ending our struggle by making peace through his blood.

And now, God will never be silent again. For he speaks through his Word. He speaks through his sacraments. And He speaks through us, His Church. We who, like John the Baptism, prepare the way once again for his second coming, when all that is sinful will melt away. Preparing the way for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells forever. Amen.