

# A Cure for Despair

Isaiah 40:4

Second Sunday of Advent, Dec. 7, 2014

Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding! “Christ is near,” we hear it say.

“Cast away the works of darkness, all you children of the day!” (LSB 345:1)

A thrilling voice is sounding? Yes, hark, a thrilling voice is sounding indeed! **It all began with that voice; a voice that came “preaching.”** That’s when the powerful ministry of John the Baptist first ignited and really caught fire—because of that voice that came preaching in fulfillment of that ancient prophecy in our Old Testament lesson today (Isaiah 40:3). *“A voice cries: ‘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. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken!’”*

Brothers and sisters, let’s remember that the road system in the ancient world was not nearly what you and I know our road system to be in this own country today. Today you can easily travel from one point of destination to another all over this great nation of ours on Interstate highways. **But in that ancient world most of the traveling was done on foot. Some of the most-traveled roads were little more than well-worn trails where the constant pounding of human feet and the pulling along of animal carts stomped down what would have been all sorts of vegetation on the roads.**

In ancient times, when a great and powerful ruler wanted to make a journey, **companies of slaves were sent ahead of him to smooth out the road over which his chariot would carry him.** Low spots and holes were filled in. Bumps were removed. Bends in the road were straightened out—all in the hope of making the journey of the approaching monarch a comfortable trip to befit such a person of his high-standing.

The Greek word for “prepare” here comes to us in the present tense imperative form of that verb, indicating an action that begins in the present, but that also continues indefinitely into the future: **“Prepare, and keep on preparing the way of the Lord!” This is the call of God not only to John the Baptist but also to us who comprise our Savior’s Church today!**

**But please note:** Instead of John the Baptist, as the herald and forerunner of Christ, going into the city of Jerusalem and to other more-populated areas of Judea where the people were already living to carry out his ministry, **John set up his “bully pulpit”** (so to speak), **in a very desolated, remote area of the country;** far away from civilization, down there by the Jordan River, some **1000 to 1300 feet below sea level.**

Nevertheless, as **John the Baptist’s reputation grew stronger and stronger,** more and more people made that long trek through the desert towards him. Certainly, the very experience of their traveling out there must have reminded them of the desert experience of their forefathers and foremothers, when God allowed their ancestors to **wander in the wilderness for 40 years on their way to the Promised Land,** because of their skepticism about his being powerful enough to deliver them safely into the Promised Land.

Now this present generation of Jewish people, centuries later, were being called upon by God’s Spirit to take part in their own desert experience, **away from their ordinary occupations and interests,** so that **John the Baptist might focus their full attention on their greatest need—a living relationship with God.** In no uncertain terms, John let them know that the time had come for them to sincerely repent of their sins before the LORD

God almighty, because the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Yes, John the Baptist was calling upon the people to engage in some necessary time for a much-needed, spiritual self-examination. He agreed whole-heartedly with the psalmist in Psalm 51, who professed: *“The sacrifices acceptable to God are a broken spirit; a broken spirit and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise!”* (Psalm 51:17).

**John’s business is repentance. It is what his baptism was all about; a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** When John the Baptist waded into the waters of the Jordan River with people, he was cleaning them up for their audience with God, which he believed would certainly take place very soon. John the Baptist called out to them to make a complete U-Turn in their lives; to stop going in a direction that would only lead them further and further away from God, but to be turned around under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to take time to discover once again the kinds of actions on their part would make their Heavenly Father proud. **John the Baptist was offering to hose these people down; to hose them down, if they were only willing to come out of their comas long enough to see what was wrong with each of them and their own lives and to say so out loud! Then God would wash it all away for them!**

**John the Baptist was offering these people a cure for their despair, because John the Baptist was telling them that their past lives, with all their past transgressions and poor choices, could now lose every last ounce of their power over them! They would no longer have to keep on listening to those nagging voices always speaking to them in their heads that repeatedly told them how bad they had been.**

In the silence that followed they would be free to begin their lives all over again, **listening to God’s voice this time, telling them how blessed they were and how much God loved them!** For true repentance is much more than simply acknowledging that we are selfish, sinful, deeply defective human beings who only seem to grieve the heart of God and that we are all very, very sorry about it. True repentance is not simply throwing our pride upon the ground and stomping on it—believing only that our arrogance and our vanity—are the root causes of so much evil.

What if the main thing that most of us need to repent of is not our arrogance but our despair: **our false belief that things will never change for us; that we will never change, and that no matter what we say or do we are stuck with the mess we have made of our lives, or the mess someone else has made of them?** What if our greatest problem is the false belief that **there is no hope for us; no new beginning, no chance of our ever being infused with new life from God ever again?**

Now that is a problem! **In case you haven’t noticed, the kind of repentance that most of us shrink away from is all about us! It is all about “me, me, me,” the miserable sinner. No wonder it is so revolting.**

The other kind of repentance, the healing kind, is far more interested in God. It spends more time looking at the kind of life God now is offering to us as members of his kingdom rather than the kind of life we can have from simply looking into the mirror. It has more faith in God’s power to make us new rather than it has in our own power to mess us up.

This is what John the Baptist was offering to people; a fresh start, a cold shower to wake them up from their spiritual sleep; a cure for their despair. **He offered it as a beginning, not an end.** He knew there was **SOMEONE** coming after him who had **something much greater to offer to people than what he did.** John says, *“There is One who is coming after me whose sandals I*

***am not worthy to unbuckle! I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!***

**When the prophet says: “Every valley shall be lifted up!” we might think about those people whose lives seem to be stuck in the past, who have lost all hope of anything in their lives ever getting any better.** Why one of the best known passages in all of the Holy Bible speaks to us of a valley like this: *“Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me!” (Psalm 23:4)*

In 1997 the well-known Christian psychologist, **Dr. James Dobson**, host for many years of that very popular radio program **FOCUS ON THE FAMILY** wrote a book with a rather strange title: **WHEN GOD DOESN'T MAKE SENSE**. In his book Dr. Dobson gives some true to life examples of situations that have sometimes taken place in other peoples' lives that may cause them to question the love that God has for them!

Dr. Dobson starts out by telling the true story of a young man he first met back in the 1960s named Chuck Frye, when that young man was only 17 years old. **He was very academically gifted** and highly motivated. After graduating near the top of his class in high school, he went on to college. Upon the completion of his **Bachelors of Science** degree he applied for **medical school**, and even though the competition was very stiff in those days, he was accepted at **“The University of Arizona Medical School”** where he began his formal training. Chuck Frye was also a very committed Christian, who earlier had toyed with idea of becoming a missionary.

During his first months in Medical School, Chuck was thinking and praying about the call of God on his life. **He was hoping to become a physician who would work with missionaries on a foreign mission field.** This eventually became his **definite plan for the future**. Toward the end of that first year of training, however, Chuck was not feeling well. He began experiencing a strange and persistent fatigue. He made an appointment for an examination. **In May, Chuck Frye was diagnosed with acute leukemia** and Chuck Frye, the medical student, was dead by November.

**Of course, Chuck's parents were majorly grief-stricken and tried so hard to make sense out of this incomprehensible thing that had happened, wondering even as very committed Christians themselves, why did God allow it?** Why was this young man taken in his prime, despite many prayers that were prayed by so many people for his healing; prayers made by family members and by friends? **If Chuck had been permitted to live, he could have treated thousands of poor and needy people** who would otherwise suffer and die in utter hopelessness. Why would God in his divine providence deny them his dedicated service?

**Dobson says that great theologians could contemplate the dilemma posed by Chuck Frye's death for the next 50 years, but still not be able to produce a satisfying explanation.** Why after much prayer was Chuck granted admittance to medical school, if he could not live to complete his training? Was his call to become a medical-missionary truly from the Lord? **Why was so much talent invested in a young man not able to use it? And why was life abbreviated in such a mature and promising student, whereas many evildoers survive into old age as burdens upon our society?** Of course, these troubling questions are much easier to ask than they are to answer.

**Cancer, kidney failure, heart disease, sudden infant death syndrome and cerebral palsy? Why would God permits any of these things to happen to me and to those I love?** Certainly the Scriptures teach us that we lack the capacity **to grasp God's infinite mind or the way he intervenes in our lives!** How arrogant of us to think otherwise! **Trying to analyze God's omnipotence is like an amoeba attempting to comprehend the behavior of a man.** In **Romans 11:33-36**, Paul exclaims: *“O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! For who has known*

*the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? For of him and through him and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever and ever! Amen."*

Dr. Dobson reminds us in his book that there will come times in each of our lives when the circumstances in our lives just don't add up, or to use Dr. Dobson's own words: "When God doesn't make any sense to us!" **On the one hand, the Bible constantly presents God to us as infinitely loving and kind, tenderly watching over his earthly children and guiding the steps of the faithful.** He speaks of us as: "*The people of his pasture and the sheep under his care*" (Psalm 95:7).

**THIS GREAT LOVE OF HIS LED HIM TO SEND HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON AS A SACRIFICE FOR OUR SIN, SO THAT WE MIGHT ESCAPE THE PUNISHMENT WE DESERVE. HE DID THIS BECAUSE HE "SO LOVED" THE WORLD (John 3:16).** This same Prophet Isaiah writes in **Isaiah 41:10**, "*Do not fear, for I am with you! Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help! I will uphold you with my righteous hand!*" No, the problem here is not with the love and mercy of God. Nevertheless, the questions persist.

**Dobson says, however, that the day will usually come in most of our lives when we will one day feel alienated from God, because those who live long enough will eventually be confronted with situations and circumstances they will not understand.**

Friends, isn't this how it was even for that great man of suffering in the Old Testament, **Job?** He suffered horrendous losses: His children, his wealth, his servants, his reputation and his friends. But those tragedies as terrible as they are—did not create the greatest source of agitation for him. No, for even then, Job fell to the ground and worshiped God saying: "*Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away! May the name of the Lord, be praised!*" (Job 1:20-21)

**Eventually, however, even Job reaches a point of despair. This man of towering strength who had coped with sickness, death and catastrophic loss soon faced a greater circumstance that seemed to overwhelm him.** It emanated, strangely enough from his inability to find God! He went through a time when the presence of the Almighty One seemed to be completely hidden from his view!

**In Psalm 13:1**, King David asks: "*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?*"

**And even Jesus in his humanity, during those moments upon the cross, when he was completely separated from the Heavenly Father for the first time ever in his whole life, when he was utterly forsaken by God that you and I might not be forsaken by God called out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

If you read the **Eleventh Chapter of Matthew's Gospel** you can see very plainly for yourself that these kinds of doubt and unanswered questions eventually plagued even the heart and mind of **John the Baptist** when he was languishing in prison. He sent his disciples to Jesus with the question: "*Are you the One who was to come, or should we look for another?*"

**The great danger for people who have experienced these kinds of tragedies is that Satan will always attempt to use their pain to make them feel victimized by God.**

Whenever we begin to slide into this kind of despondency, we need to be reminded that trials and sufferings are unfortunately part of our human condition. All of the Biblical writers, including the giants of the faith, went through similar hardships. Look at the experience of **Joseph**, one of the **patriarchs of the Old Testament**. His entire life was in shambles until the triumphal reunion one day with his family many years later. He was hated by his brothers, who considered

killing him before they sold him as a slave. While in Egypt, he was imprisoned, being falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar's wife and threatened with execution. There is no indication that God explained to Joseph what he was doing through those many years of heartache or how the pieces would one day eventually all fit together!

**Joseph was expected, just like us, to live out his days, one day at a time, in something less than complete understanding. What pleased God, however, was Joseph's utter faithfulness to him when nothing in his life seemed to be making any sense!** And how can any of us ever forget that **great moment in Joseph's life, when God worked through all these painful events to eventually make him the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in command in the Egyptian nation. On that day, Joseph, as a type of the Christ who would later after him, wept tears and absolved his guilty brothers of all the sins they had committed against him, saying: "You meant it for evil but God meant it for good!"**

There are times in all of our lives when we are faced with circumstances that just don't seem to make any sense to us, either! But the most **NONSENSICAL THING OF ALL is that God should enter our world as One of us in the gift of his Son; the One who was tempted like us in every way but who never sinned.** And that the spotless Lamb of God would be born to offer his perfect life as a sacrifice for our sins, and that God the Father would raise him from the dead three days later to assure us that he accepted the sacrifice that his Son made on our behalf! **In this message the light of God's grace still dawns powerfully upon each one of us today!** You know what St. Paul says: *"The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For since in the wisdom of God the world, did not know God through wisdom it pleased God, through the foolishness we preach, to save those who believe!" (I Cor. 1:18-21)* Amen