

6 December 2020, Advent 2
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
On the Road to Repentance
First Mennonite Church

It's coming we are told. It's coming. Probably by the end of March 2021 but for sure by fall of 2021. It's coming.

I'm talking of course about the Covid-19 vaccine. Promising



vaccine candidates from U.S. pharmaceutical companies Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson as well as the U.K.'s AstraZeneca, are all currently under



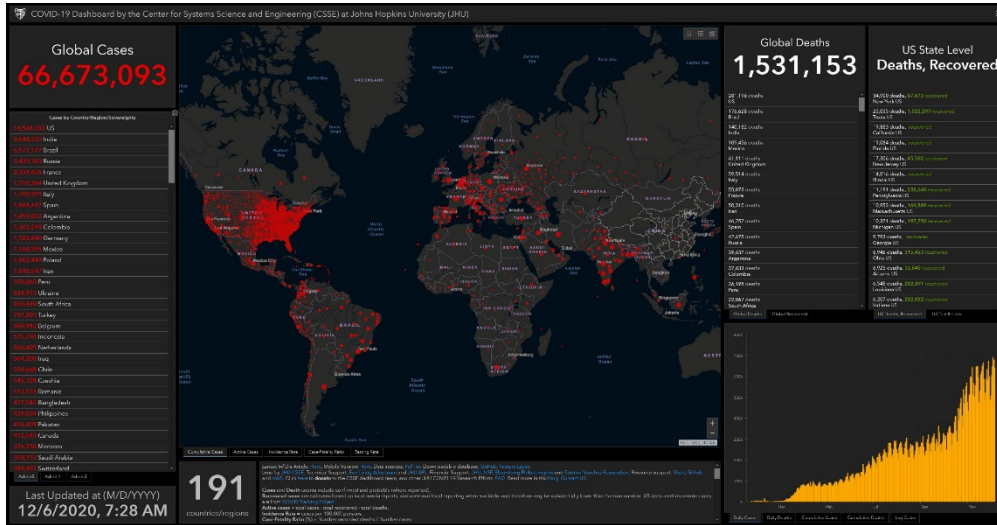
review. According to Health Canada, the first COVID-19 vaccine **approval** could come before Christmas.¹ Canada could get an initial supply of four million doses by the end of March with more and more doses arriving as the year progresses.²

Even though it's coming, it's not here yet. We are still in the midst of a global virus pandemic. I talked with my son who lives in HKG this week. HKG is currently in the middle of its 4th wave. We are only in the middle of the second wave. MB and BC have banned all public gatherings, including in-person worship services. SK imposed a 30-person limit on in-person worship services, but that 30 doesn't include the pastor. What does that say about the pastor? Does it say that pastors

¹ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/canada-s-first-vaccine-approval-could-come-before-christmas-chief-health-adviser-says-1.5205986>

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are uncountable because they aren't important enough to count? Does it say pastors are uncountable because of their infinite worth—you can't put a number on them? I'll let you decide. Because of this 30-person limit, we had to move quickly to develop a plan for how we will worship together for the foreseeable future.



As of this morning, global deaths to Covid-19 stand close to 1.6 million. This week in Canada, we passed the 412,000 mark in total number of

cases, and 12,607 deaths. Here in SK we have 55 deaths.³

South of us, in the USA, the situation is grimmer. According to the US director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci says the number of US fatalities could approach 539,000 as the country has "yet to see the effects of any Thanksgiving holiday-related surge."⁴

Even though the vaccine is coming, it's not here yet. More people will get sick and die. And so, we wait. Desperately wait. Wait for deliverance because the situation we're in won't be solved by ignoring reality, pretending the virus doesn't exist, or continuing to do what we did prior to the pandemic.

No. We've all had to alter our habits and activities, as hard and frustrating as it was and continues to be. Our well thought out plans have been upended—many times. Everyone has Covid-fatigue.

How do we wait and prepare for God's coming in times like these?

³ <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2020/december/04/covid19-update-one-death-283-new-cases-126-in-hospital-183-recoveries>

⁴ https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-12-05-20-intl/h_6c1f5ec5de79ba9f27b8a0925b3a0902

First, we must acknowledge that God is coming. John the Baptist prepares us for the Lord's coming, telling us how to get ready, what we've got to do and how we've got to think if we are to see, hear, and experience God's arrival in the world.

You see, John the Baptist is the first person we meet in the Gospel of Mark. John is a preacher. We don't know all that much about John—he was a cousin of Jesus, he was a preacher, he preached out in the wilderness, and he looks like, talks like the prophets in the Old Testament.

What we do know about John is the sermon he preached. John's sermon is very short. (I have a pretty good idea of what many of you are thinking right now, when I mention John's short sermon. Stop thinking that!)

Here's part of John's very short sermon: *“One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”* (Mark 1:7-8).

Mark begins his gospel, right before the sermon, by saying that this is the “beginning of the good news.” In fact, the word gospel means simply good news. John is said to be a “messenger.” What is John's message? Good news.

He put it right here at the beginning. But neither Mark, in the first verses of his gospel, nor John, in his very short sermon, give us much content of this gospel, this good news. So, what is good about this news? John's short sermon says it: “Good news, the one whom you have been so long awaiting is coming. He is a mighty one. I'm unworthy even to untie his shoelaces. While I wash you up with water, he will pour upon you God's Holy Spirit!”

John tells us very little about this mighty one who will come after him. The main thing, John says, is that the long wait is over. God is coming.

This advent season we are on the road. What's the Advent good news? God is coming.

The short Advent sermon of John is not the whole truth of the good news. We must await the rest of Mark's gospel to find out the content, the substance, and the full implications of the words and work of this mighty one who comes. For

now, on our second leg of our journey on the road, the good news is God is coming.

While John is the messenger sent with a message, John is also the voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. How do we prepare for God's coming into the world? How do we prepare for a God who will bring healing, peace, justice, and new life? How will our preparations help us to see the arrival of God into our world, into our midst? The first way is to acknowledge that God is coming.

The second way we prepare has to do with this word, repentance. Repentance will help us to prepare. The church and Christians have struggled with this word over the years. At times, repentance has been equated with *doing penance* for one's sins through such penitential actions as fasting, special prayers, or pilgrimages. In today's world, repentance is often understood primarily as a feeling, a feeling of sorrow or regret about one's sins. Sometimes preachers use emotional rhetoric, along with a good dose of judgement, so that we'll all feel sad, anxious, and guilty that we're somehow not doing enough or don't measure up. And all too often, it's come in the form of scolding.

In its simplest meaning, the word for repentance can mean something simply as to change your mind. In the Bible, however, the word, repentance, carries a much richer meaning beyond simply changing your mind. In the Bible repentance means to turn around or return. Stop and change direction. It means to stop walking off in that direction, turn around, and head back in that direction. It's about turning around and going in the direction of God, or turning towards God and deciding to live in God's world.

In Luke, for example, bearing the fruit of repentance for tax collectors, who had a reputation for being cheats and crooks, meant *collecting no more than the amount prescribed to you* (Luke 3:13). For the soldiers, who often acted like the Mafia, repentance meant *not extorting money from people by threats* (Luke 3:14). For everyone, repentance meant: *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise* (Luke 3:10).

Let's be clear: Repentance **is not** about feeling bad or saying, "I'm sorry." Repentance **is not** a private thing between a lone individual and God in a closet somewhere. Repentance goes beyond doing penance. **Rather, repentance is a re-orientation of life, a total turnaround in our priorities and values, a change of**

perspective and direction, and a commitment to turn and live differently. In other words, repentance is about change.

Change is not easy. Change is a daily thing and right now in human history, we find ourselves in a time of unbelievable change. The virus pandemic is a change we cannot control and that makes it so much harder. Generally, we like to be in control, like to know what is coming so we can plan, don't we? Change is a call and a challenge to grow, but it is also a reality of life itself. To live is to change and to grow is to change much. The words of John the Baptist call us out of our spaces where we feel comfortable and safe.

Sometimes I think of John the Baptist in his camel skins, long beard and urgent cry to repentance and wonder what that looks like today. Where is the Holy Spirit calling us today as individuals and as a community of faith—at our location on the road—to change in this season of the pandemic? Is God calling us to change?

There is a world full of people that are hurting, feeling isolated and alone, hungry to know they are loved, that they have value, that life has a purpose and meaning. I look around and see the effects of addictions, domestic violence that many people experience, homelessness, hunger, and lack of self-worth and ponder how we reach into those pockets of despair and hopelessness and shine the light of Jesus in the darkness where so many people live.

Is God calling us to change? We spend much time these days working on how we are going to gather together for worship. What if we devoted as much time working on how we move out from our building into our neighbourhood, our community seeking justice for the oppressed, walking alongside our brothers and sisters, hearing their stories and bringing the healing love of Jesus with our presence? How would we need to change?

Right now, those sorts of things are tough to do given that we are in the middle of a virus pandemic, with its stay-at-home orders and bans on gathering together in groups. But that doesn't need to stop us from preparing for God's arrival. We can still prepare by living as Christ-followers in our own immediate circles, our neighbourhoods, our communities. We can still live out the Good News of loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, strength, and loving our neighbours as ourselves. We can still love all of God's creation. Some of the best ways we can practically love our neighbours right now as we're "on the road" this Advent season is to:

- Wash your hands frequently
- Wear a mask when you are out in public
- Keep your distance from others
- Keep your social circle small
- Keep in contact with others by telephone or other electronic means

So, on this second Sunday of Advent, I've got some good news. God is coming. Turn around, repent, and notice. As we are on the road this Advent season, we will continue to fill out the specifics of that good news. We may find ourselves surprised that the God who shows up is not exactly the God whom we expected. When God speaks, God may not say to us exactly what we wanted to hear.

Nevertheless, let none of that block the force of this very good news. For all of those of you who wait upon God, who find yourselves in circumstances where the waiting has been long and hard, good news. The Lord is near. Your prayers have been heard. Turn around. The Lord is at hand. Amen.