

A photograph of a tea plantation with rows of tea bushes in the foreground and a dense forest in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

MARK 1:4-11

REPENTANCE

REV. SIMON PARK

Scripture Passage

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Sermon



Repentance

A new year has begun, and it began with new hopes. But in many ways, the turbulence of the past year doesn't seem to be past us yet. We're still living through a time of great turbulence. It's like we're on an airplane flying through stormy skies. Just when we hope for a smooth patch of sky, we hit another storm and more turbulence rocks our plane. I know it's been a long time since any of us have been on an airplane, but we still remember it. We have been through a lot of emotional turbulence, and each jolt of it triggers our anxiety.

Moral Leaders

When times are turbulent, we seek leaders and voices that can assure us, calm us, and give us a sense that all will be okay. We rely on leaders to guide us and lead us. We seek leaders we can trust and follow. We become disappointed and angry when they let us down.

Perhaps fragmentation of the media is a big reason, but we don't seem to have many moral voices that we




can all rally around. Larger than life figures like Martin Luther King Jr, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela have faded from our midst. Leaders like that give us a compass to navigate hard times. When we lack moral leaders we can trust and rely on, it leaves us anxious and uneasy when times are turbulent.

John the Baptist

It was in a turbulent time like this that John the Baptist appeared. It had been 400 years since the last true prophet had lived. Prophets had been moral voices, to tell Israel where they were going wrong, and to lead them back to who they were supposed to be. They weren't always appreciated or liked - many in fact were killed - but they were nonetheless moral compasses for the people. But for the last 400 years, there was a void of this moral leadership that could show people the way.

Out of this void emerged John the Baptist. This wild man in the wilderness, eating locusts and clothed in camel's hair, became a moral compass for the people of Judea. He hit a nerve that drew people from the whole country. The message that hit this nerve was a simple one: repent for the forgiveness of sins.



The repentance he proclaimed was not merely feeling bad for the things they had done. It was a repentance aimed at healing ruptured relationships in the community.

Repent

For 400 years, the Jews had faced continuous strain: politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. The constant strain and turmoil affected relations in the community, right down to the intimate family levels.



John was calling people to turn away from the things that were ruining relationships in their families and communities. Repentance was a call to change their hearts and conduct. To seek forgiveness for the things they did to one another. It was a call to seek God's mercy and power to change so that they might repair and restore their relationships with one another and be a people of God once again.

Sin Blocks Love

The disciple John wrote this: ***“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” (1 John 4:7).***

And from this I realized, when something blocks love,





that is sin. When love is blocked, we are separated from God and others. Because God is love. And that's what sin is: to be separated from God. Sin is therefore whatever blocks love. Repentance is removing whatever blocks love. Repentance is removing whatever blocks love.

What is blocking your love?

This year will be the 10th anniversary for me and Deb. Time flies. We've had many good moments, but also many difficult ones too. In these difficult moments, it really felt like our love for one another was blocked. Anger, frustration, resentment, and despair would block love from flowing between us. These were our sins. Over the years, we've started to recognize and identify some of these things that have been blocking that love from flowing. Things that have been shaped by our past experiences in our own families. What we thought was the other person's problem was really our own issues that we hadn't dealt with. Sins that remained in us. Repentance entails an honest examination of the things that are blocking love and seeking God's power to change and remove these things one by one so that our love can flow more freely.

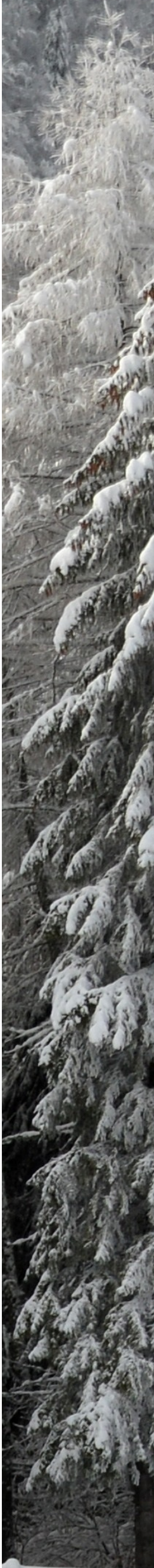
Sin Blocks Justice

The black scholar and intellectual Cornel West once said this: "Justice is what love looks like in public." (Cornel West). So there is love at our intimate, personal level. And there is love at the public level. They are both important, because we live in both of these worlds. And as long as love is missing in either of these dimensions, our lives are not complete. That is what MLK Jr meant when he said, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny".

There are so many things blocking love in public. I have been so disturbed by the events of this past week that took place in Washington, D.C. I'm still processing many things in my mind, but more than the affronts to democracy, the disregard for truth and the attempt to exert power through violence, what's most disturbing to me is how rooted all of these things have been in the fundamental issue in America: that of race and racism. At the end of the day, race is the root issue of everything in America. Racism is what blocks love in public; it is truly the root of so much of the injustice that we see. The whole premise of the stolen election is focused on the supposed fraudulent votes in predominantly African-American cities. Every undertone

of grievance has deep connections ultimately with race. Joe Biden merely voiced the obvious when he said if this mob were a group of Black Lives Matter protesters, they would have been riddled with bullets way before they even got to the gates.

Racism is the original sin of America, and so much of the present reality in the West is rooted in race. It is a root sin of the entire West, and Canada is not an exception. I love this country and am so thankful to be a Canadian. I am thankful that my parents came and that I have experienced so much opportunity and abundance. And I think that overall, Canada is a very generous country. But what we see in public is not love for all. Our history is rooted in the subjugation of our indigenous people, and the effects of that history are still borne out today in our communities. Race and the history of its implications are lived out daily in the lives of black, indigenous, and other peoples of colour. Jenny Kim recently shared with us on our website about the experiences of a black manager at her workplace and their discouraging attempts to address the situation. We often point out that things in Canada don't seem as overt and extreme as the United States, but these daily experiences of racism still have a corrosive effect on



those who experience it. It makes people feel like their lives are less valuable and important.


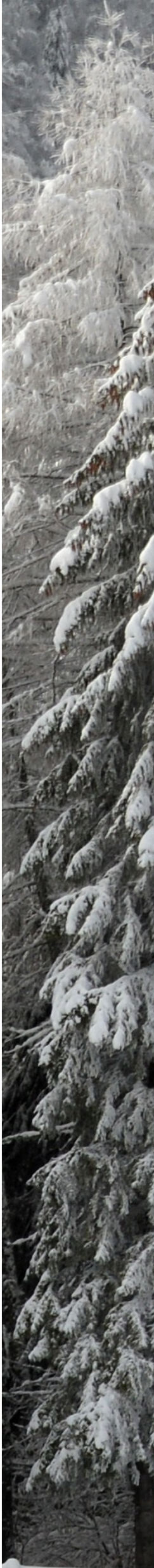
I mean, it is so absurd in many ways. If we are all God's children, equally beloved by our Creator, why is love given to some but taken away from others? Whose lives matter in America and the West?

Fear Blocks Justice

We need to seriously examine ourselves and honestly look at what is blocking love in public. We need to remove whatever blocks justice. Racism and our indifference towards it are big blocks to justice.



As I think about our own community, Koreans have had a very interesting experience with race in Canada, and we've navigated the issue very tenderly. I know that we've all had very different experiences with race, and how we've responded is very different too. I'll be the first to admit that my own views stem from my own experiences that are not necessarily what others have experienced. But my general observation is that Koreans have been very hesitant to be vocal about issues of race. Perhaps we even minimize the extent of this issue. I think there's a lot of fear. Fear of not





wanting to stick out or cause trouble. Fear rooted in many things like our history. Fear rooted in a deeply ingrained inferiority complex that's arisen from our history of weakness and powerlessness. Somehow, many of us came to believe that the best we can do is to simply survive by putting our heads down, not raising a fuss, and carving out a safe space within this society. Fear drove us to seek safety and security as our top priorities. Fear is what makes protecting the spaces we've carved out for ourselves remain our top priority. The message we've internalized is to not rock the boat, to stay in our lane, just get along and enjoy my rewards.

This fear has snuffed out our desire for justice. It's made us indifferent to the ways things are. Or made us feel powerless to do anything about it. Our fear and indifference block us from love, from seeking justice. I know what all of this feels like from first-hand experience. As a lawyer, my duty was to advocate first and foremost for my client. And I was passionate about issues of justice, as I saw what many black and other racialized people went through. The reality is, in the courtroom, I was always one of the few, if not only, racial minorities in that courtroom. The judges, Crown Attorney prosecutors, and courtroom staff, were often





all white. As multicultural as our society is, the power structure is still very white. There's one moment that stands out in my mind, where a judge began saying things to my black client who had his charges dropped. He was not guilty, innocent, but he was saying some patronizing things to him, rooted in what I felt were assumptions based on his race and background. I could feel the anger bubble up within me, and I knew I should say something - after all, who else could advocate for him but me as his lawyer? But if I'm honest, before this white male judge, I felt inferior and powerless, and I became afraid. I was more afraid of maintaining my standing with those in power than I was of advocating for my client. My fear overcame my desire for justice, and I remained silent. It was not my finest or proudest moment.

Fear blocks out desire for justice. Fear makes us small. Fear makes us self-centred. Fear makes us indifferent and silent. We need to repent from our fear and be opened up by God's Spirit.

Tikkun Olam



There's a Hebrew word called *Tikkun Olam*. It means "repair of the world". *Tikkun Olam* is what lies



underneath our entire faith: Behind God's call to Abraham, to the law given to Moses and the Israelites, to the prophets who preached justice with holy fire. *Tikkun Olam* was what John the Baptist was preparing the people for. Jesus' baptism of the Holy Spirit in today's passage was the beginning of his mission to repair the world. The church and its people are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue that mission begun by Jesus. We are called to *Tikkun Olam*. The Holy Spirit fills us and opens up our lives to do this. And it begins with the call to repentance - to remove all that blocks love.

The scene in the wilderness that we see today was a mass movement of repentance. Of people coming together to seek God's forgiveness and power to remove the things blocking them from love. Reflecting on this scene brought me to the events of the great Pyongyang Revival of 1907. Pyongyang, which is now the capital of North Korea. cAlmost 114 years ago to this day, something remarkable happened. God came down in an amazing way to the Korean people that would change the course of history.


This too was a turbulent time in Korea's history, and the



people were in pain. Missionaries from Canada native Korean Christians prayed for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit for revival and repentance. One night, at a gathering, a minister began to confess all of his sins in front of everyone. As he did so, he broke down in tears and agony. From that, a tidal wave of confession and repentance began. One by one, proud Korean men would come up and publicly start confessing their sins - what they had done to others, how they hated the Japanese, and everything else in their hearts started pouring out. They began to weep and pound the floors in agony and the whole room shook. It's like all the pain of sin and brokenness in their hearts were released, and the Holy Spirit came upon them. The room was filled with sounds of crying, prayers and wailing. It was truly like the room at Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit swept through the room. This revival lasted over a month and swept the countryside, much like it did with John the Baptist in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit came, a community was formed, and the church was born in Korea. Confession and repentance were at the heart of this revival.

Repair our World

The ministry of John the Baptist was a reverse journey



from the Promised Land back out to the wilderness. He was calling the people to go back to the wilderness, where they had once been formed as the people of God. In the wilderness, they reoriented their lives back to God and turned away from the things that had fractured their relationships.

We are in our own time of wilderness right now. Not necessarily of our own choosing, but it is the situation we're in. In a time of anger, division and hatred, we need to let love flow. In this turbulent time, we need to repent from what blocks our love.

This is the year for us to Open Wide. Turn your anxieties into prayer. Open your mouths wide in praise. And adding to that: repent from what blocks love in you.

God will tear open the heavens and come down on us, so that we can do God's work of repairing this world.

