

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
 “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight,’”

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Each year the church asks us to prepare for the coming of Christ in a way that is different from how the world prepares. This second Sunday of Advent we prepare by going into the wilderness and hearing the message of that strange prophet, John the Baptist.

You know John. He’s the guy with the camel hair coat. He is decidedly not jolly and does not drive a sleigh with cute little reindeer.

Instead he comes each year eating locusts and wild honey. His message is a simple one. Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand.

Each year I fantasize about creating my own Advent decorations to counter the garish decorations that are so much a part of the season. I can just see the looks on my neighbor’s faces as I dress up a mannequin with a camel hair outfit, a long haired wig and a placard placed in front of him that reads “repent.”

I’m sure I would get complaints from the homeowner’s association. John is a strange character in any season, but he especially seems out of place in the Christmas season.

But, if Christ is to be born in our lives this season, if we are to be baptized with the Spirit of Christ, we need to first make a detour through the desert and hear the preaching of a man named John. We too need to confess our sins.

Now for most of us the strange image of John and his message of repentance does not seem very inviting. But, consider this. The call to repent can be good news because in the call to repentance is the implication that we *can* change. Things don't have to be the way they are in our society and in our lives.

God can make a difference in our lives. Salvation is still possible. God can still build a highway in the wilderness of our despair.

THE BEGINNING

No doubt the English teachers in the congregation noticed that the first sentence in our lesson for today does not have a verb, which means of course that it is not really a sentence at all!

This is Mark's title, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Everything that follows in Mark's gospel is based on this.

God was in Christ. And this is just the beginning. There is more to come.

That's a good way to describe the message of Advent.

This is just the beginning. There is more to come. There is more to the story. Jesus, the Son of God has come to earth, and this good news has changed everything forever.

Do you believe in the message of Advent? Do you believe that this is just the beginning that God still has more for us to do and see? Do you believe that God still intervenes in the affairs of men and women?

Do you believe that there is still hope for people like you and me? Do you believe the old, old story is also good news for today?

I think this is the great challenge of the season, to overcome the pessimism and cynicism that infects our world with a message of salvation for all people.

Like John the Baptist we point away from ourselves to a hope that is above and beyond us. Something is about to happen in our world, and it is something good.

That is the message of Advent.

A BEGINNING AND AN END

Mark begins his story with the conclusion. We know from the very beginning of the gospel what everyone else in the story does not know until much later. God was in Christ.

And this is good news. The victory has already been won. The prophecy is fulfilled. Salvation has come to a desperate people.

Do you remember how the gospel of Mark ends?

Actually, it doesn't end. The last line in Mark seems to end in the middle of sentence. It goes, "They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid ...". This unsatisfactory ending had all the scholars and scribes scrambling for a more satisfying ending.

But, I contend that the ending of Mark is not really an ending at all. Mark writes,

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But, go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

I think that the message of the angels is not only for those first disciples. It is also for us. This is just the beginning. God goes ahead of us to bring us salvation from the present day.

This is a theme that we find throughout the Bible.

EXLIES LONG FOR DELIVERENCE

Long ago God's people suffered in exile. The Babylonians had taken them captive, and it looked like there would be no deliverance. They were about to give up.

And into that situation of despair God's prophet brought a message of salvation. God would lead his people back home. As He had done before when they were slaves in Egypt, He would lead them through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

And it happened. God allowed his people to return home to the Promised Land. God once again made a way in the wilderness. God was ahead of them, leading them home.

It had been many years since that first homecoming, and God's people were once again in need of salvation. The Romans had taken over their government. Taxes were unbearably high. The religious leaders added to the burden of their people by their legalistic interpretation of the law.

Many once again prayed fervently for deliverance. An oppressed people longed for a prophecy of hope. Once again they wanted God to make a way where there seemed to be no way.

And once again they learned that God did indeed go ahead of them.

Into this world of despair came one who reminded the people of the prophets of old. He proclaimed a message of hope in the wilderness. And the people came from all over to hear the message.

The Bible tells us that all of Jerusalem and the surrounding area came to hear John. They confessed their sins and were baptized as a sign of their repentance.

They were getting ready. The Messiah was coming. And this Messiah would not baptize with water. This Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

HOLY SPIRIT, GOD WITH US

What did it mean that the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit?

It meant that the power and presence of God would be in this Messiah. This Messiah would not only bring a new message but also a new reality, a new world, a new creation, and the very presence of God.

Mark's title is reminiscent of what was said when the Roman emperor Augustus was born. There's a new king coming. Good news!

But, in this case the news is truly good. Jesus would not be more of the same. Into a world filled with self-serving politicians and opportunistic religious leaders a Messiah was coming.

Instead of lording it over people he would lift people up. Instead of taxing the people to death he would fill them with the bread of life.

Instead of telling people that they are destined to be who they are and where they are for the rest of their lives He would tell them that there is hope for the future.

They could change. They could repent. They and those they loved could go in a different direction.

Mark's gospel reminds us that God has a way of showing up where we thought God was not supposed to be. God is not found, at least at first, in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem but out in the wilderness.

And that's still where we often find God. God meets us in our wilderness. God meets us in our despair. God's grace goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be.

Are you in the wilderness? Remember, God in Christ goes ahead of you preparing a salvation that is beyond what we could imagine.

MAY CHRIST BE BORN IN YOU

A Christian writer visited a monastery a few weeks before Christmas. As she walked outside she passed a monk and almost without thinking greeted him with a cherry “Merry Christmas.”

His reply caught her a bit off guard. He said,
“May Christ be born in you.”

What did he mean by that? Why did he say, “May Christ be born in you?”

But, after reflection she began to realize that Christmas is not what we have made it, having a merry old time and going to parties. Christmas is about the birth of Christ, not only long ago but also here and now.

The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit still comes. He comes to transform who we are and how we live. He makes all things new.

ALGEBRA

It was the first day of algebra class. He was tense. He had that sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Algebra always did that to him. He was no good at algebra. He didn’t want to take it. But, he had to take it.

The new teacher walked into class. She looked a lot like the old teacher. She was holding in her hand a book that looked a lot like last year’s book, all algebra. His heart sank.

He decided to tell the teacher from the very beginning that this was going to be a struggle. He went to her desk. He told her about how bad he was in algebra.

She wasn’t interested in his confession. Instead she replied,

“Oh yes that may have been true before you had me for algebra. You are going to find that I do things differently. I prefer to get people who don’t know a lot about algebra so I can teach them from the beginning. Let’s just say that you are at the beginning.”

The young man went back to his seat. He could breath again. His stomach felt better. He was at the beginning. There was hope for him yet. Change was possible.

This is also the message of Advent. God takes us back to the beginning. God lets us have a do over. God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

Where is the wilderness in your life? Are you facing sorrow and pain? Are you struggling with uncertainty? Are you afraid of what the future may hold? Are you overwhelmed by guilt?

Some of us can check all of the above when it comes to those questions!

But, no matter who we are or where we are there is hope. A voice cries in the wilderness. The way of the Lord is being prepared. The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit is coming into our world.

In the wilderness of our failure and fear, John comes to us with a message of hope and good news. Repent and believe. The kingdom of God is at hand.

GO DEEPER

One afternoon, the writer William Boggs and his family learned a valuable lesson about life. He was driving on a hot Carolina afternoon when he passed an orchard of "U-Pick" peaches. He writes,

"I doubt any bargain would be sufficiently attractive enough to lure me out of my air-conditioned car into a steamy afternoon to pick fruit, but we pulled over, paid our money and selected a bushel basket to fill with fresh, ripe South Carolina peaches."

"As we set off into the orchard," he writes, "an old fellow, as wrinkled as a peach pit who was tending the place said,

'If you want the best fruit, go deeper into the orchard; the peaches on the fringes are picked over, but deeper in, you'll find the best fruit.'

So, we walked a way and figured we had gone far enough. We set the basket down, but the old man hollered, 'Go deeper.'

"So, we picked up the basket and went a little farther and then when we started to pick, the man said again,

'No, go even deeper...the best fruit's farther in.'

Once more, Boggs and his family picked up their basket and walked a little further, thinking they were surely deep enough and as they finally felt like they had gone as far as they could, the old man hollered once more, 'Go on. Go deeper.'

And then he writes, "And so we did, right into the midst of the orchard, and we found the old man was right -- the finest, plumpest peaches were untouched and waiting for us."

Advent is a time to go deeper. John's voice speaks to us from our wilderness.

It is a time to repent. It is time to turn away from those things that take us from God, and it is time to turn toward those things take us toward God.

If Christ is to be born in us this Christmas season we have to go deeper. We have to go beyond the superficial celebration of the season to find the sweet fruit of salvation.

What about you?

Have you gone deep enough or are you only skimming the surface?
I will not say Merry Christmas during this Advent season.

Instead I say,
“May Christ be born in you!”

Amen.