

The good news is just beginning
Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Mark 1: 1-8
Second Sunday of Advent, Year B
December 6, 2020

It's not the healthiest thing in the world probably, but every morning we watch the news (first the local NBC4 and then the first few minutes of the Today show). I think to myself, those folks have a hard job. Savannah Guthrie and Hoda Kotb bring the news into living rooms across the country, and it's usually not very good. Part of what I love about my job is that I get to bring you the good news.

George Buttrick, a legendary teacher of preachers, used to say that every preacher, just before entering the pulpit, should think "I have wonderful news to tell these people." I was reminded of that because Mark begins his book with the phrase "good news," the most natural translation of the word we usually translate as "gospel¹."

This good news is not simply Al Roker saying, "it's going to be sunny today," or your neighbor texting you "Costco actually has toilet paper in stock." It's the good news of the victory of Jesus Christ. And not just his victory over death, but the results of that victory: peace and an end to oppression.

The one who brings us the good news first is John the Baptist. He paves the way for Jesus with hints of the good news, and leads people to turn toward even more good news to come. To prepare the way for Jesus, John both speaks and acts. He proclaims that change is possible and by baptizing people from all over, he leads them into that change. By preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, John is telling us that change is possible.

The original language of Mark's gospel is Greek, but reading this passage I was reminded of one of my favorite Hebrew words. (I have several friends who have this word as a tattoo: biblical language tattoos are very popular among the millennial pastor set) The Hebrew word for "repent" in Hebrew is "shuv," and it can also be translated as "to turn." I like this because it gives a concrete image to an abstract concept. When God is asking us to repent, God is asking us to turn toward God. I like the image of turning because it makes me think that when we repent, we are leaving something behind. We are leaving behind our sins, those things we have to repent for, and we make a conscious effort to turn toward God.

When we repent, we literally change direction, we stop moving away from God and start moving toward God. This is what we have to do to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. We don't have to believe that the way things are is the way they will always be. Like John, we can believe and proclaim that things can turn around.

Advent is a time when change seems possible. We feel the change of seasons, maybe we're done with 60 degree days? We put away pumpkins and put up Christmas lights. I think we're all hoping for something new in the new year.

In our daily Advent devotional, one of the writers, Dr. Marcia Riggs talked about that change. "As we light the Advent candle of hope, we keep awake by dreaming, by envisioning how we will live out God's promise to be with us. We expect God to be with us and meet us on the other side of this pandemic and protest. For the other side of the pandemic and protest is not a return to normal, it is living in the hope of God's continuing revelation of justice²."

¹ Placher, William C. *Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Mark*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2010.

² <https://sanctifiedart.org/those-who-dream-devotional-booklet>

We often say we want things to go back to normal, but what is normal? Normal was when we took for granted being able to hug each other. Normal was when we could easily look beyond the hardships faced by so many people whom we depend on to make our lives easier, like grocery store clerks, Amazon delivery drivers and restaurant workers. Normal was when systemic racism was at best, a part of life, and at worst, something we refused to acknowledge.

I don't want to go back to that normal.

I want to savor every hug.

I want to care deeply about the wellbeing of the person making my salad at Cava.

I want to have my eyes wide open to white supremacy and call it out at every turn.

We can't make changes alone. Even John the Baptist knows that. He says, "the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." Acknowledging our limits is a huge part of change. Repentance is not only a solo act, it's something we must do together. Not only can we personally repent, our church can repent, our nation can repent, all my fellow white people, we can all repent.

This is how we can prepare the way for the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah calls us to do.

This year I was particularly struck by the third verse of the passage from Isaiah. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." When we prepare the way of the Lord it's not in an idyllic, pastoral paradise. The way of the Lord is not a nicely paved road or even a well-marked path. The prophet Isaiah tells us that the way of the Lord is in the wilderness.

Where the trees are so thick you can't see the sky. Where the dust swirls up and gets in your eyes. Where the wind is so strong that you can't stand still. This is where the Lord is made known. Somewhere dangerous, somewhere lonely, somewhere scary. And yet, it is there that the prophet promises comfort.

This is the wonderful news that I have to tell you today: It is precisely in the wilderness that God comes to us.

When every trip to the store is a risk, God meets us. When we go hours or days without seeing a single soul, God meets us. When we face an unknown future, God meets us. On Zoom or through windows or a masked wave hello, God meets us.

Some commentators have said that the line "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," does not just serve as an opening line, but also as the title of Mark's gospel. This invites us to think that the whole story that follows is a beginning. Indeed, when we get to the last sentence of Mark, it turns out that Mark has no real ending. He leaves the story open-ended, challenging the listeners to continue the work of sharing the good news. One way to do that? Repent and prepare the way of the Lord.

In the wilderness, God meets us.

During the Advent season, God meets us.

Thanks be to God.