

On this 2nd Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves again in Mark's Gospel, the earliest of the four Gospels, written at the height of the Jewish-Roman War. The Romans were about to destroy Jerusalem, including the temple. It was a time of great struggle and disorientation. This is the context in which Mark's Gospel is written. Mark tells us in his opening words that Jesus is the Son of God. He doesn't need stories of a miraculous or mysterious birth to 'prove' that. In Mark with just "a few quick brushstrokes, the saga of the good news of Jesus Christ is launched" (*Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes*, Cynthia B. Campbell). Before we read God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in Mark 1:1-8. **READ.**

For Mark, the Good News begins not with Jesus' birth story like Luke or Jesus' genealogy like Matthew or a vision of the cosmos like John but with Jesus' forerunner and cousin, John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus. Mark's opening verse is the beginning of more than a Gospel; it is the beginning of God's plan of salvation in a specific person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. "The news about Jesus is good, not because of what will happen to Jesus; it is good because Jesus' ministry makes powerfully transformative things happen for others" (*The Discipleship Study Bible*). It is good news "because it is not anything we could or would ever come up with ourselves. Because any truth that we generate from within ourselves simply doesn't have the power to save us" (Nadia Bolz Weber, Sermon "An Advent Sermon on the Turmoil in America, Repentance, and Confession"). For only God can accomplish our salvation. The good news in Mark's Gospel begins with a hearkening

back to the words of the prophets. Mark combines quotes from Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1) to make the connection with John the Baptist. John was dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt, the exact same outfit the prophet Elijah wore eight hundred years before. In the Jewish tradition, Elijah attends every Passover seder, as Elijah signals the promise of redemption. For Mark, John the Baptizer takes the role of Elijah, here to announce the arrival of the Messiah. The message? "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The early followers of Jesus were not called "Christians." They were known as "followers of the way." Isaiah spoke about building a way, a highway; Mark repurposes the way being constructed is the way Jesus' disciples will follow" (A. J. Levine, *The Gospel of Mark*). Who is preparing the way? The imperative verbs are in the plural. Y'all. It is the responsibility of all y'all (us) to do the preparatory work. I confess that sometimes I get distracted by those nicely straightened paths to notice just where they lead: to the wilderness. That desert place where everything familiar disappears and the fear creeps in, where you can get truly lost. Mark chooses to open in the wilderness with a wild man in a wild place shouting Good News! Like real estate and bus stops, location matters, especially in the context of Scripture. Just to be clear, "The wilderness of the Bible can be harsh and austere, bleak and inhospitable. Its weather patterns unpredictable. Its water sources scarce. There are no established trails. The wilderness of Scripture isn't a destination we choose by ourselves. Sometimes we're taken there against our will. By illness, or loss, or trauma, or hardship. We end up there when careful plans fail or someone we trusted betrays us or our beloved dies or when

the faith we've practiced so effortlessly, suddenly dries up (Debie Thomas, www.journeywithjesus.net). The wilderness is a place of parched solitude, endless spaces, where no one feels at home. Yet, wilderness can also be "a refuge where you can hide from your enemies and the evils of the 'civilized' world. Mostly, it is a raw and unknowable place of encounter where we come face-to-face with ourselves, our environment, and our horrors, hallucinations, hungers, and hopes. We find ourselves- and God- *in the wilderness*" (Diana Butler Bass, e-newsletter, *The Cottage*). Like it or not, "the wilderness is a place that lays us bare. A place where life is raw and risky, and our illusions of self-sufficiency fall apart. There's something though about the wilderness that brings us to our knees and softens us towards repentance" (Thomas).

As the days become shorter and the light diminishes, many of us are anxious. So many things in our world seem unknown and unsettled: wars in Europe and the Middle East: innocent people being killed, continued viruses and diseases, racial and economic injustices, climate change, a nation deeply divided, job losses, etc. Remember that today's Gospel lesson is not about the syrupy-ness of hallmark cards; it is rather good news from a place of struggle. John's message is simple: repent. So from what do you need to repent in order to prepare the way? Confess, repent, baptize- *Wash that stuff off* is what John says! Prepare the way for new beginnings: new life! The Good News is that the Holy One is continually making a way for do-overs. In this we can find peace, even when life and the world doesn't feel so peaceful.

This is good news from the front lines of life– good news in the midst of struggle. One who baptizes not with water but in the Holy Spirit is coming, hence John’s strong suggestion that the present, right now, is the time to repent. And this good news, ***the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*** will forever reshape and transform how we understand more personal news like: your cancer has spread, due to budget cuts your job has been eliminated, you will never conceive a child, I regret to inform you our university will not be accepting you this fall, your son will never walk again, you’ve been evicted, I don’t love you anymore. This news, ***the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God***, is altogether different from any other kind of news you will ever hear. So listen up, as this news is a game changer!

John’s proclamation is more than a call to repentance in some sort of righteous indignation or as a self-improvement guru. We do him a disservice when that is all we think he is: a backwater, *fire, and brimstone* preacher. His is a proclamation of good news- to repent, to turn back to a God that draws near, to turn back to the One who has the Holy Spirit upon him, to turn back to the One who can deliver people in ways that John confesses he is not powerful enough or worthy enough to do himself. ***Not fit to bend down and loosen the straps on your sandals, Lord.*** Many people, particularly those who grew up experiencing the Church’s teaching on sin *as a weapon*, hesitate right here. Many of us associate sin with guilt, self-loathing, and hellfire/damnation. So, we approach confession with fear rather than

confidence. Society too is good at teaching people confession of other people's sins- **but that is not confession that is blame.** When we confess our sins as a community like we do every Sunday in worship- we do not blame one another. I confess my sins, you confess yours- and together we face what we have created or failed to create in our lives as a community and we beg for Christ's forgiveness. "Repenting means fixing broken relationships and so doing one's best to restore community" (Levine)- to restore peace. We hunger for Christ's peace- for the restoration of broken relationships. Many times when we think of peace, we think of the absence of war or conflict; however, peace involves something that is complex yet refers to completeness. Life is complex and when anything is out of alignment, we don't experience peace or shalom. To bring shalom means to make complete or to restore. Christ is our shalom...our peace. And Prince of Peace gives us a deep well of strength with which we can face our mortality and the hardships we encounter in life.

To prepare to receive Christ, we must first admit we need him and then confess our sins. Repentance isn't about feeling bad or receiving 50 lashes with the whip. It's about freeing yourself from holding on to all your stuff- all the stuff in your life that keeps you from any kind of restoration with God and others. BUT it's too difficult to hold onto our stuff with one hand and reach for Jesus with the other (Bolz Weber). Repentance is about being changed. For persons- and for creation- transformation must be real and in this world. Genuine discipleship includes an ongoing posture of confession. This is so against the norm of

the world in which we live. And then after confession, the next step is to make restitution where it is possible, thus turning from sin to righteousness. "God was, and is, always ready to forgive the repentant sinner" (Levine). All those people coming out to see John- they were people hungry for the good news of Jesus Christ. Into the wilderness came streams of jerks, hypocrites, addicts, and liars, emotional manipulators and physical abusers, in came the gossips, greedy stockholders and greedy looters. In came every person who knew they needed forgiveness and understood they could not give it to themselves (Bolz Weber). **Repentance is about real, honest change** which leads to a peace that passes all understanding. It looks like leveling mountains, raising up valleys, making straight what has been crooked and bent. We prepare the way to Bethlehem when we pour out the shame we have been hiding in ourselves to the One alone with the power of Spirit to restore us- to bring us to wholeness. And that requires us to stop being the moral monitors of other's heart *and to look honestly into our own wilderness* and reconcile with those whom we have hurt or whom have hurt us. "See, repentance is what happens to us when the Good News, the truth of who we are and who God is, enters our lives and silences the voices of competing ideas" (Bolz Weber).

It doesn't matter particularly what kind of wilderness you are in; what matters most to Jesus the Christ is that *in your wilderness* **you hear** the proclamation of the WORD of God: the good news that God has not left us alone to suffer our own dreadful ends. Your salvation draws near! John the Baptist was a harbinger of Jesus' first coming. We are

harbingers of Jesus' second coming! This invasion of hope, peace, joy and love began in the birth of Jesus Christ. **It is an invasion that is still going on and into which you are invited to participate.** Just as we're invited as Christ's disciples to create peace. Christmas is about God's own revolution of love, forgiveness and restoration to wholeness. His dream of shalom- of peace- for all. The gift of Christ's peace reminds us that we can experience serenity even in the midst of non-peaceful situations. Peace is not simply the absence of conflict. Peace is an ever-present gift that we can open at any time when we stop, breathe, and trust that we are never alone. And the gift of peace we can give is to be presence for those who feel alone. God will accomplish all that God intends. *Prepared or not* it is Advent- God's advent- and, so to speak, the bus has left the station. **For nothing in all creation shall stop God's love- that** is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.