

Advent 2  
December 6, 2020  
S. Stephen's, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we just heard, our Gospel reading from Mark begins somewhat breathlessly:

“The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

It excitedly sets the stage for what is about to come,  
and much of Mark's Gospel is written in this quick-moving,  
suspense-filled, edge of your seat fashion.

Yet the second sentence of Marks' Gospel tells us it isn't really the beginning:  
rather, it's a continuation of sorts.

He next quotes the prophet Isaiah,  
and if we were good first-century Jews,  
we would immediately understand what this is meant to convey.

After years and years, generations upon generations of waiting –  
watching, waiting, and longing –  
the promised Messiah foretold in scripture has arrived.

We are presented however, not with Jesus,  
but with John the Baptist,  
who bursts upon the scene today and is indeed the central character of Advent.

For churches sharing the common Lectionary,

John the Baptist will hold center stage this week and next.

All four Gospel writers agree:

there is no Good News of Jesus Christ without John.

John, of course, as we are told,

is sent to prepare the way.

As I said in in this week's e-news,

it's just good, sensible planning on God's part –

tilling the soil and softening the ground –

laying the groundwork before the big operation commences.

But beginning with John the Baptist sets the stage in more ways than one:

more essentially, for the original audience of Mark's Gospel,

John the Baptist would have helped set the location – yes, the location

of the story of Jesus within the context of Israel and its story.

As the prophet Malachi wrote,

“Behold, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me ...

behold, I will send the prophet Elijah before that great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” (Mal. 4:1-4:5)

And when we read the description of John the Baptist in Mark

and realize it is the same as the description of Elijah in II Kings (1:8),

we begin to understand what Mark is trying to convey:

that John the Baptist is the new Elijah,

standing, as Fleming Rutledge puts it,

“standing at the edge of the universe, at the dawn of a new world,  
the turn of the ages.”<sup>1</sup>

However, most baffling to our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities –

this Good News begins not by echoing Isaiah’s cry of

“Comfort, comfort ye my people,”

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and tell her that her warfare is ended.”

Every tenor present here this morning could actually sing this entire passage of Isaiah,

along with all the other singers, in the preferable King James version, I imagine,

who will have recognized much of today’s reading

as forming the opening portions of Handel’s “Messiah.”

Yes, Good News is on the way.

But words of comfort we get not from John.

Instead we are confronted with a message of repentance.

I imagine that this immediately conjures up images

of those men or women standing on a busy street corner in pre-COVID times

yelling through a bullhorn,

standing with other people holding big signs

with Scripture verses,

using fear and intimidation,

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming Rutledge, “Advent: the Once & Future Coming of Jesus Christ,” p. 277.

and shouting at us about a vengeful God who is going to punish us for ever  
if we don't shape up and live by the straight and narrow.

You know the scene I'm talking about.

And this, you think, is how God announces Good News?

Well, that's not quite what is going on here.

First of all, as opposed to standing on a busy street corner,  
we are told that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness –  
he went to a place where there in fact are not many people around.

That's a rather poor location to choose  
to preach a message if you want folks to hear it, in my opinion.

And yet hear it they do – they come to him – and they come in droves.

We are told people from Jerusalem and the countryside of Judea  
flock to hear John's message of repentance and forgiveness of sins –  
and they end up being baptized in the River Jordan.

To my mind – this wilderness location and a sort of re-entry through the waters  
of the Jordan River

evoke the larger story of Israel:

wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, as they are confronted with their sinful ways,  
finally learning to get it right,  
and crossing through the Jordan River into a promise land.

Thousands of years later,

John is here proclaiming a new age to a new Israel –

offering them a chance to return to the ways of their God,

and to enter anew into the new Israel through the waters of baptism.

But why was his message so convincing?

A clergy friend of mine was watching “A Muppet’s Christmas Carol”

with his young child the other day,

and so what I am about to share with you I am shamelessly borrowing from him:

He commented on what he finds is the most brutal and yet most convincing thing in “A Christmas Carol,” which is the order in which Scrooge is given his visions.

In Christmas Past, he is reminded of his flaws, his humanity,

and his need for a new start.

In Christmas Present, he is shown and experiences unconditional love,

that he neither earns nor deserves.

In Christmas Future, he is confronted with the full burden of his actions and decisions,

which literally lead to death, and the subsequent rejoicing of those he hurt.

It makes sense, then, that when he awakes from these visions

he reverses the course he’s on:

he returns to the path of life, not because of anything in himself,

but because of the love of people around him,

who love him in spite of himself, like Bob Cratchet, Tiny Tim, and his nephew.

My friend suggests that call to repentance by John the Baptist

works in much the same way:

not so much convicting us of Sin (which happens in the process),

but calling us out of pain, isolation, and hurt,

out of a world where love does not triumph,

into a world of grace, redemption, and reconciliation,

where love and forgiveness always have the last word.

This is what is so compelling about John the Baptist's call to repentance –

*this* is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our own faults, our own failings, our own mistakes do not have the last word.

God's promise and God's love will always win out.

As the prophet Isaiah cries out,

the people are like grass –

“the grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God endures for ever.”

Isaiah's cries of “Comfort, comfort my people”

in which he speaks of a promised day of God,

and asks them to prepare themselves for good tidings, and new beginnings,

were written in bleak circumstances.

Israel had been defeated and overrun,

the Jerusalem Temple razed to the ground,

and a good portion of the Israelites were exiled to captivity in Babylon.

And yet out of this bleakest of settings,

this world where only defeat and misery and sadness were known,

Isaiah is given a vision of hope which has gone undiminished three thousand years later.

What better message to us,

as a pandemic continues to rage around us,

and we are confronted with terrifying losses,

and grieving separation from our loved ones,

especially around the holidays –

What better message to us in this season of Advent,

to remember that God's prerogative is always to create new ways and new possibilities,

new life where there was once death.

That despair and isolation never have the last word.

Even in these darkest of days,

can we join with Isaiah in seeing the promises of God opening up

an entire realm of new possibilities – a world transformed;

can we, like John the Baptist, stand at the edge of the universe,

at the dawning of a new era within our selves,

and prepare to enter God's promises anew?

This is the work of Advent – this is what it means to prepare the way for the Lord;  
to prepare the way for God to act upon our lives – within us, and through us.

So wherever you find yourself this morning,  
wherever you are in this season of longing and waiting,

I urge you to stay watchful, and to keep waiting –  
keep trusting in that promised day of God.

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, fear not;

say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might.”

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel.

Amen.