

Advent 2 - Dec. 10, 2017
year B - Mark 1:1-8
God is waiting for us

Advent is more than an ecclesiastical way to count the shopping days to Christmas. Advent is a time of waiting, expectantly and lovingly. We wait to celebrate the birth of the One who changed our lives. Advent is a time of un-fulfillment. We wait for Jesus to come and put an end to the pain that surrounds us.

Advent means *coming* in Latin. God's coming in the place and time of Jesus birth; God's coming to us now in our lives; and God's coming in the future, as king and Judge.

Today's readings reveal another side to Advent waiting: God is waiting on us. Longing and waiting for us to turn our hearts fully towards God, for us to ready ourselves for the imminent coming of God's kingdom.

Isaiah and John the Baptizer exhort us to prepare the way for the Lord. *God is patient with you*, 2 Peter wrote, *not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance*. God is waiting for us.

The Gospel of Mark – our primary gospel in this new church year B – skips the genealogies, the annunciation and the birth stories. Mark starts right off with the adult Jesus: the ministry, the miracles, the struggles and confrontations out of which our hope emerges.

The Gospel begins, *'As it is written in the prophet Isaiah...'* Here is the fulfillment of God's promises, the good news of what God is up to now. *Now* being that time and place when Jesus walked the earth, and the *now* of Jesus in our lives.

Mark's Gospel speaks urgency, the *'right now'* about Jesus. John the Baptizer moves us to actively prepare the way for the immediate coming. Now.

Isaiah's words of comfort were surely a surprising message for a suppressed people. The people, in exile for several generations, were given the chance to return to Jerusalem. Imagine them making the decision to leave the lives that had become familiar in exile, to journey to the city they dreamed of all their lives, pictured through the stories told by their elders — and had never seen. They come upon Jerusalem. There it is, a wrecked city, a wilderness. Walls crumbling, everything that was precious, smashed.

Imagine today's refugees from Turkey, Syria, Iraq. Will they return to their homeland to find wilderness, a wreckage of the homes and land and sacred spaces they were forced to leave?

'Here is your God' cries Isaiah. Right here. In this wreckage, this wilderness. If God is present anywhere, God is *here*. Now is the time to start rebuilding. *Comfort, O comfort my people says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem*. The comfort of forgiveness, inequity atoned for.

The focus is not on the people who journey, but on God, who commands, enables, becomes present to them once again. Their humanity is apparent, their sinfulness alluded to. Neither their faith nor their struggle is mentioned.

Here, rising out of the wreckage, this wilderness of Jerusalem, is your God. *'Lift up your voice with strength...do not fear.'*

Some 500 years later, John appears out of the Judean wilderness. He is clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; he eats locusts and wild honey. Mark's careful description is a sort of social shorthand and introduction– the people would have some idea right off who this is. John is – like Elijah, the Scriptural fulfillment announcing that the day of the Lord is near. As the prophet Malachi proclaimed -- *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.*" Malachi 4:5.

John will introduce the One who is to come. The day is coming, is *now*.

Will there be darkness, or light?

Imagine the crowds coming from Jerusalem and the countryside, gathering at the river Jordan to be baptized by John. There is a long twisting descent to the muddy river bank, and a hefty climb back up to the cities and towns. There are great crowds – their sheer numbers testify to the importance of John and his message. His voice is confrontational, and not to be confused with the gracious voice of Jesus who is to come.

John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He is the living messenger of Isaiah, the voice crying out in the wilderness, *'prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'*.

Prepare to *receive* the Lord. The Lord who freely invites and expects our very best *and* our total engagement. The Lord who expects us to show up with all we've got, prepared to participate fully. No 'sort of' commitment, no 'doing only what is necessary.' Our very best includes our imperfections.

The word repentance seems too narrow for what the Scripture conveys. It is more than simply lamenting, being sorry, for our sins, and moving on. Repentance is on-going spiritual discipline, self-examination. Hard truth-telling, facing up to the systemic practice of greed, the readiness for violence against the vulnerable, the complacent acceptance of economic injustice.

Repentance is a vehicle through which we seek *transformation*, we engage in active discernment of how **we** can work to bring about God's will in the here-and-now. Repentance calls forth our *reorientation* – reorientation to participate in the goal that God's will be done on earth.

I saw a photograph of a protest sign in this morning's paper. The sign said, *"I am no longer*

accepting the things I cannot change; I am changing the things I cannot accept." This is re-orientation.

Walter Brueggemann describes Advent as a lion making space for the lamb.

"A roaring truthfulness that disrupts our every illusion...Our preparation for Christmas is not a safe, private, or even familial enterprise, but is preoccupied with great public issues of war and peace and issues of economic justice that concern the worth and bodily well-being of human persons. Our Advent preparation may invite us to consider the ways in which we ourselves are complicit in the deep inhumanity of our current world." *Gift and Task*, p 2.

What does the 'roaring truthfulness' of Advent require of you? Some questions.

Am I living in right relationship with God and with God's purposes? God's will for justice, mercy, righteousness, compassion? Am I loving my neighbor as myself? In what ways is the world 'out of sync' with God's purposes, with compassion and economic equity? What is my role, what is ours, in accepting 'out of sync' as the normative state of the world?

Can you stand with the returning exiles, in the wilderness of the crumbling walls of Jerusalem? Today, with the people of Jerusalem, of Ramallah and Hebron, of Palestine, now? Can you say with strength not fear, *Here is our God*. God is present here and we must begin to rebuild our society, our relationships.

Metaphors of the wilderness have in common the notions of solitude, vulnerability, and quest. Untamed, unpredictable, notions of a place of searching, dangerous and not in our control. A quest for deeper understanding, for healing, for personal growth, for reconciliation in relationships.

We humans have an innate desire to be part of something larger than us; we share an assumption that life has a purpose. Belonging is essential to our being. Belonging to something, to someone, to somewhere.

When we are spiritually disconnected, we seek approval, ways to fit in, often at the expense of our authentic self. We seek the approval of our culture, our societal status quo; we participate in shared fear and disdain, we tolerate name-calling and demean rather than raise up the weak and vulnerable. We succumb to the pressure to conform. We revel in the echo chamber of the internet, finding those places where our own views are repeated and magnified, and discarding as wrong any who disagree.

How did we arrive at this place of hubris, substituting our judgment for God's judgment, our vision of the truth for God's Truth?

Why are we unwilling to listen to, to acknowledge and explore each other's vision of truth? Can we learn to hold our partial truths, together? This is not about flexibility with the truth, but understanding that no one of us holds the fullness of God's Truth. Can we live faithfully with paradox, with the *both/and* of the world?

'Roaring truthfulness'. About yourself. Your authentic self *and* your conforming self. Confess, repent, be *transformed* by baptism by water and connected by God's love.

Experience shared humanity. People are hard to hate close up, so move in. Hold hands with strangers.

Those returning from exile in Babylon, the great crowds at the banks of the River Jordan, are part of the same spiritual story, part of something greater than group membership, politics or ideology. We are invited to be part of that story.

If we are willing: To be connected, vulnerable and open. To get *uncomfortable*, enter the hard conversations, look for joy, share pain, seek moments of togetherness. To be more curious than defensive. To engage in critical truth speaking, to be unsettled, to ponder ideas that we do not welcome.

We hunger for things of the spirit, for belonging, for a life full of meaning. The Christian story, the ministry of Jesus, begins with this longing of the heart, of the spirit. And, the baptism of repentance.

Preparing for the Lord is going down to the river and getting muddy and wet. Being open, vulnerable, *transformed with expectation*.

Today, there is no need to deny that much has been lost and much needs to be built. There is no need to deny that we ourselves, our leaders and our nation are weary and even despairing. We need to say, again and again, that God is with us, whatever the situation. We are all preparers of the way.

We can pave the way for great things and great possibilities that are to come, for us and those who make their path from ours.

We possess everything that any former age possessed. Think about it. We possess the word of God, the sacramental food and drink of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit of God, and the presence of the risen Christ. The Jerusalem we build will not be the same as the Jerusalem we remember, but build it we must.

Make the Lord's path straight to your heart. God is waiting for you. *Amen*

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