

Beginning of the Good News

Mark 1: 1-8

2nd Sunday of Advent

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The scripture for this second Sunday in advent is from the Gospel of Mark the first chapter, verses 1-8. And remember Mark jumps right in, no lingering at the manger for him...

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

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

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

Prayer of Illumination

God of the universe, revealed to us in the Holy Scripture through the writings of the prophets and the preaching of John the Baptist, you have called us to prepare our hearts for your invasion. Ready us now to hear your word and to respond as faithful servants, to the glory of Christ. **Amen**

Sermon

The beginnings of each of the four gospel stories are different. Matthew begins with genealogy and doesn't get to the birth of Jesus until the 16th verse, and it isn't until the 3rd chapter that we see Jesus in ministry. Luke also takes his time getting to Jesus, also in the third chapter. And in the gospel of John it is the 29th verse of the first chapter.

But in Mark, it's dramatic; we get to Jesus quickly. Almost like an invasion. By the 9th verse, you get the feeling Mark's message is - this is it! Pay attention! It leaves us a little unsteady. Mark seems to be in a hurry to get to the ministry of Jesus. But it's not such a surprise when we understand the context in which Mark is writing. Mark starts by giving his audience an anchor to hold on to in the familiar words of Isaiah. These words had been passed down from generation to generation for over 500 years to the people hearing John when this was written, and even longer for us. And for the people flooding to the banks of the Jordan to encounter this wild man John the Baptizer, they will need this anchor.

Many came thinking he was the messiah. And who greets them but this man dressed like a beggar, eating honey and locust, not at all what they expected. But what he preached must have resonated with the people because they flock to him from all over the country side, they spread the word from person to person, the only way to get the word out. John's "good news" came at a time when they really needed it. A time that echoes with us today:

Rome and Caesar ruled all, and only the elite didn't suffer. These well off members of the community were not just the Romans, the religious leaders of the day were often working with the Romans, not only for protection but also

for power. The Romans governed by military might, and oppression. There was a lot of suspicion and distrust. Neighbor against neighbor. There was a revolt by Jewish Zealots that puts everyone in danger, because when the Romans put down an uprising they do it violently. And into this mix you find these new Christians, the ones who follow the crucified messiah. And after all those years in exile in Babylon the people of Israel must have felt like exiles even in their homeland. The few had it all. The majority was working hard but was never able to get ahead, what with heavy taxation, they had to borrow from the rich to pay their taxes and were never able to get out from under with the exorbitant interest rates of the loans.

This is the time in which Mark writes, so it really isn't strange that it is dramatic and urgent. The people must have been willing to try anything at this point. Many came thinking John was the messiah. They were willing to see even this man as the king. They went into the wilderness, so they would have had to leave their homes and crops, and shops and many of them their families. And I can't see that they all would have been the downtrodden and oppressed. There had to have been religious leaders, well to do merchants who may have come to witness a spectacle only to be convinced to repent and be baptized.

Into this John the Baptist brings an unconventional message, in fact the entirety of his placement and proclamation is upside down:

- People are standing in line to be baptized – a long line apparently if the whole countryside and the city are coming out
- How is this baptism by the Holy Spirit supposed to happen?

- In such a militarist culture the people would be looking for a messenger who would rally them to “over throw” their oppressors, drive them into a frenzy of action, to prepare for an invasion. And in many respects this was an invasion.

John is calling them to prepare themselves for the invasion of God’s love. From one who will proclaim, “All are welcome, all are forgiven, and all are servants to each other,” a self-sacrificial service to God and to the other members of the community.

It is difficult to understand the word invasion in any other sense than as militaristic. An invasion is violent, relentless, it changes your world. But what kept coming to mind when I was searching for a metaphor for the invasion of love was the birth of my first child. She was an invasion. Having this child was like BAM, here I am, better hold on. She took over my life, every minute of my time, my relationships changed, I saw the world from a new perspective, even trips to the grocery store and rides in the car were turned upside down. Even when I was away from her, she was with me. She had taken over my heart, my very being. That’s what God was and still is doing, invading lives and hearts, changing our very being.

John, this unconventional herald, should have been a clue to them about who would be leading this invasion that was to come. John is in the wilderness not standing on a military field or in an opulent castle. Not the traditional mighty warrior king of the past, riding in with power and might. He proclaimed a savior who appeared simple, but would change the world. God breaks into the world and gives them a king like themselves. God invaded and broke in coming as one who looks like them, like us!

In this gospel they are told to prepare for the invasion of God's love, a God who enters the world and offers a life that is very different from the one Caesar offers. John tells them that the way to prepare is to look inward to recognize where they have sinned, who they have hurt, to discover how they have not been connected to God. To repent.

These people, people who are suffering under an oppressive regime must have been thinking "what has happened is not because of anything I've done, it's what those others have done." That's what we too might answer if asked to repent. It's not me it's the system, the other guy. Even if that is so, none of us are ever blameless. So this invitation into the wilderness, to a liminal space is jolting, but it is the very place where God can be met. Here in Mark, this liminal wilderness is where God's invasion takes place.

But John proclaims "good news" first. Mark's view of repentance is not so much to turn away from our sinful ways as it is to seeing differently. If we see differently we will live differently. John the Baptist is asking them to look hard at who they are and who God wants them to be. It is hard work to discern what God is doing.

John is a transitional figure, he is not the one to lead but the one to point the way, to point to the one who is to lead. I wonder how the people felt when they arrive on the banks of the river only to find it was not the savior, it was just someone telling them how to get ready for the savior. I can image some of them saying, "wait, haven't we done enough already? We have been waiting so long and you tell us we have more to do?" Many stayed and were baptized, but how many shook their heads and walked away, muttering I can't wait, I can't take any more?"

It is strange that we get this text now. It's not one of the texts we choose when we first arrived here, as your transitional pastors. And we did not choose it now, it is the revised common lectionary text for this second week of the church calendar. Honestly I did not plan to drop this on you today. It does give us a reminder of what all pastors really are – transitional, pointing to the real leader – God, and how often this is pointed out to us in scripture.

In Mark, John is helping the people see that they have work to do, preparations to make even as they clamor to ask if he is the one. Quoting Isaiah reminds them of their ancestors, again it is their anchor. In Advent we hear and remember our ancestors, those who helped prepare the way. Why are we surprised that we resist transitional leaders, when we resist transitional times in our lives? But we are always in transition, we never escape it really. And we should remember the discoveries we make in transitional times. We unearth buried treasures.

What is it about this transitional leader, John's words that drew the people in?

What is it about his words that draw us in? He talks of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and John doesn't throw out threats. This invasion of a loving God is glimpsed here. Repentance is seeing differently. Repentance is not looking back with nostalgia. For us Advent is a season dripping with nostalgia. No not nostalgic, it is about taking stock and seeing ourselves with an unfiltered lens. We are reluctant to repent and confess because we will discover that we are complicit in much of what is going on, we will see what we should have done, but didn't, we will see the holes in our lives for what we wish had been and can never be, we will feel guilt, anger, shame, resentment,

a list that can go on and on. But the wonder of John's call to repentance is that when we recognize those things and let them go we see the amazing gift we have in our God, who claims us and loves us first. When we are "seeing differently" through the eyes God wants us to see with, there is joy and love even in the midst of the pain and hardship of life. When we are taking stock we also see the good and kindness in us. We discover the gift of community that feeds us spiritually and emotionally. We yearn for a God we can see, for a path that is clear ahead of us. What we have is a God that is just out of sight. But John's proclamation that Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit gives us the reassurance that God will always be with us.

In this season of Advent let's think of repentance as a positive instead of a negative, let's have eyes that see differently. As with the people standing on the banks of the River Jordan let us hear as John tells them their sins will be forgiven. There was no list of laws or rules they needed to follow to be forgiven, just repent "see differently." I think that was what drew them to John's message. And draws us to the message as well. Repent and be invaded with God's love. Now that's an invasion worth joining.

God breaks into our time with the good news. Every Advent we get this good news – when we hear the story of God breaking in. We need to hear this good news with fresh ears each year and reclaim it again, and again. The joyful tidings are that God/Jesus keeps coming.