

Dec. 6, 2020 Advent 2B

Mark 1:1-8

What's New?

COVID-19 has taken away one of the challenges we face during Advent. One of the great challenges during Advent and Christmastime is to hear anew the familiar story we all know. We all know the story. We've all seen the Christmas pageants. We've set up the Nativity crèche with the holy family, cow, donkey, and shepherds. It's become almost too familiar. In part, that's why we have the season of Advent. These four weeks serve to prepare the way to Christmas via a bit of liturgical "wilderness," to use a great word from our Gospel lesson. The penitential season provides a time of reflection and contemplation so that we can hear the good news of Jesus' incarnation afresh and let the gospel sink more deeply into our lives.

This year is a bit different, to say the least. For many, this does not feel like the usual joyous march toward Christmas. Hundreds of thousands around the globe will be spending their first Christmas without a loved one who has passed on due to the pandemic. Millions more will be attempting a celebration without their usual large and festive gathering, due to travel restrictions. For almost the entirety of the year, we have all been a people anxious and waiting in a lockdown-long Advent. And with no cure or vaccine, there is no clear path forward out of this dark season.

It has made me read this Gospel lesson quite differently this year. Our introduction to the life of Jesus in Mark's Gospel includes the words, *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—"a voice of one calling in the **wilderness**, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

For the 25 years that I have been preaching Advent sermons, I have read right over that word "wilderness." Not this year. It is great word to describe everything new about Advent 2020.

This has been a year full of new experiences, and every little thing is cast in new perspective. And yet, while the harshness of wilderness may be felt more deeply this year, the same ageless truths remain constant. We are just able to see them more clearly. The fundamental truth of these wilderness seasons is that we are waiting on an imperfect and broken

world to pass. The season of Advent reminds us that no matter who we are or where we are in time or space, all earthly things will come to an end.

Nearly 30 centuries ago, Isaiah wrote to God's exiled people, who were longing to return home. God's message to them is one of comfort. The Lord is coming. On first hearing, Isaiah's message hardly seems one of comfort: "The grass withers, the flower fades... surely the people are grass." That does not sound like a fairytale ending – and it's not. The comfort offered in these verses is more complex than a "happily ever after" coda. The comfort comes by putting things into a divine and cosmic perspective. All people will fade like grass, but God is mighty and endures forever. The goodness of God will prevail. The prophet does not give an immediate timeframe or an immediate solution to the heartbreak and suffering of the people in exile; what is offered instead is a message of hope for the future.

Second Peter is also written to a people longing for God's return. The author's message is not unlike Isaiah's: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire." All things will, in the end, pass away. And in the end, God's justice will prevail. While we don't know the exact date of its writing, we do know that this epistle was written to the fledgling Christian community experiencing persecution at the hands of the ruling empire. They are looking for Jesus' return and immediate relief from their suffering. But God does not descend with thunder from the clouds in triumphant material salvation. Instead, God's word instructs the early Church to step back and seek a divine and cosmic perspective. A thousand years is like a day, and a day is like a thousand years to God. Again, this does not seem like a happy fairytale message for a people experiencing immediate pain and anguish. The author goes so far as to say that God's lack of thunderous return is not to cause more suffering but instead is an act of love and patience. Once again, we are given a word of hope for the future, but we are also given instructions on how to live in the present: "Strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish."

In our gospel reading, we read the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Without much prelude or fanfare, we are thrust into the action in the desert. The prophet John the Baptizer proclaims in the wilderness a familiar message. At this point in history, Israel has been invaded and occupied by

the Roman Empire. And now John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Though crowds flock to John—the reading says, “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him”—John still points away from himself and toward someone greater to come. John points to a hopeful future by promising one who will come baptizing, not with mere water but with the eternal Holy Spirit.

Our readings also show us that waiting is not a passive action. We are to live out our hope. In waiting for the fullness of the Kingdom of God, we proclaim God’s message of justice. We name sin. We turn toward justice. We stand in the wilderness, pointing to the one more powerful than us. As the psalmist writes, “Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.” Where righteousness and peace are actively enacted, God is there.

Our Advent message from John the Baptizer is not to adopt a bug-and-honey diet or de-clutter the closet to make room for the camel skins. The message isn’t even to level mountains or make a straight highway running through the desert! Our Advent message is that we are called to be a people that await the coming of the Lord. We are always in waiting—through victory and defeat, triumph and loss. It is certainly our job as the church to proclaim peace on earth, goodwill towards all, and joy to the world. But it is just as much our job to be visible in the wilderness, naming injustice, oppression, and apathy as sins. We name these things as sin not to cast judgment or humiliate or ridicule. And least of all do we name sin in order to exclude people from our “in” group; it is precisely the opposite. We stand in the wilderness and welcome all to journey with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. We point to something better. We point to the Christ, the one who is more powerful, more patient, and more loving. We point to the Christ, the one who is to come.

This Advent, many of us are already in the wilderness. Let us step back and pray for a glimpse of the divine and cosmic perspective. We remember that all things here on earth are temporary and ephemeral, and we work to embody God’s patience and love here in this world. Let our lives be shaped by our hope in the truth that God is coming. That allows us to stand in this 2020 Wilderness and wait and yet still be who God has called us to be—a people known by love, who live by faith and who give voice to hope. Amen.