

Isaiah 40:1-11 ~ Mark 1:1-8

*Prepare the Way*

December 10, 2017 ~Second Sunday of Advent & Sacrament of Baptism

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***Intro to Scripture Lesson:***

We are about to hear Mark's birth story. I use the term "birth story" loosely, because Mark's birth story is the one you never hear on Christmas Eve. It's not about Mary and Joseph, nor do shepherds, wise men, or any angels you would recognize from central casting appear for the big night in Bethlehem. In fact the setting is not Bethlehem, but river Jordan and Jesus appears on the scene fully-grown. What is Mark telling us? What is Mark heralding about the Good News of Christ Jesus? Why does he begin here? Let us ponder these questions as we listen to Mark 1:1-8.

**Sermon:**

Are you ready for Christmas? We hear that question a lot. And we probably hear ourselves asking it, too. From store clerks, to close friends, this question is in the air. Bob and I cut down and trimmed our first Wisconsin Christmas tree this weekend. That makes me feel a little more ready. We all have different traditions and rituals to help us get ready. One of my early childhood memories of getting ready, was sitting at a card table in my Gram King's living room when I was about eight years old. On this card table were lots of little presents she had ordered from a catalogue months earlier for all of her children and grandchildren (this was way before Amazon.com or the internet). I got to help her wrap them, and of course this was all top secret. I loved knowing about these presents and not telling anyone. And I marveled at how far ahead she had started on this project of preparing for Christmas. How do you get ready?

Today, we just heard the wild and woolly, honey and locust-eating, leather-belted, camel hair wearing John the Baptist alerting his followers that something very big was coming soon: GET READY! THE BIG ONE IS COMING! REPENT NOW! If we really listen to John the Baptist, this angular, intrusive, explosive appearance of Jesus sounds more like a meteor landing than the birth story we love about Mary and Joseph and the stable behind the inn. John the Baptist is not talking about tape and scissors, sugar cookies, holiday sales at Wal-Mart, or Cyber-Monday. This beginning of the good news brings to mind bull dozers and wrecking balls: He's talking radical change, reconstruction, rerouting, reworking, rethinking: big change is in the air.

Are you ready or not? And if we're not, how do we get ready? How do we "prepare the way"? That depends on for whom we are preparing, doesn't it? In my family I learned from my mom and dad some particular steps involved in getting ready for the coming of a loved one to our house: Clean house (not my favorite step), prepare the favorite foods of the person coming, the things they really like, put flowers on their bedside table, make room in the bureau drawers, check for hangers in the closet. My Dad would always need *extra* hangers, iced tea with lots of lemon

(no matter the season), and being a diabetic, orange juice in the fridge and Splenda packets on the table. For my mom, chocolate chip cookies would be enough. And, remember to get out and wear whatever presents they might have given us – clothes, earrings, household objects. That’s how I was taught to prepare for “the most honored guest” before he or she arrived.

If it’s Christ who’s coming, how do we get ready for this most honored and deeply loved, so like us and so not like us, Guest? Let’s think, building on how we get ready for a houseguest: what does Christ like? What gifts has Christ given us? How do we rearrange our homes and lives to get ready for Christ? This is what I hear Isaiah, Mark and John the Baptist shouting to us about from the wilderness:

**Prepare the Way of the Lord!**

Today, this Second Sunday of Advent, is the day for us to listen to the voices of two messengers, these prophets, yes, these Angels, Isaiah and John the Baptist, heralding proclaiming truth about the One who is the Way. Today is also the baptism day of Luna Belin, standing with our feet in the river Jordan, seeing all those beautiful children welcoming her into our community of faith, we must ask some important questions. What did we baptize her into? What are we going to teach her? What is this “way of the Lord” that offered hope to those in exile in Babylon, and to those oppressed by the power of Rome in Jesus’ time, and to the first audience of Mark’s Gospel written during the horrific events of the Jewish war? How we “prepare the way” in the political and economic context of our day?

Isaiah, Mark and John the Baptist all point to a kind of preparation that has more to do with digging, rerouting, regrouping, reworking, highway reconstruction—than with buying and wrapping presents or baking Christmas goodies. Perhaps along with the beautiful stole and Hug-a-Bible baptism gifts, we should also have given Luna a hard hat and a bulldozer. What am I talking about? In a word, we are being called to REPENT. Yes, to prepare the way of the Lord, to get ready for Christ’s coming, is a call to repent. To turn around, to go beyond the mind you have (as Marcus Borg puts it). Yes: to change. To change whatever is separating us from Christ.

Oh no, not that. Where’s the merry in that? Leave it to you preachers preaching Advent and killjoy John the Baptist to take all the jolly out of our Christmas season. We’d much rather get ready for that sweet little baby Jesus, born to young and beautiful Mary (we imagine her that way don’t we?). Mark, the first Gospel written, didn’t even include this part of Jesus’ story at all. Mark skips to the chase from the word “go.” He chose to begin the beginning of the Good News in the River Jordan, rather than a Bethlehem stall. His birth story, his incarnational event sets up in the wilderness and at the river’s edge: a setting rich with continuity, the waters of creation, the deliverance of Noah, the Exodus of Israel out of bondage through waters of the Red Sea; and discontinuity. God becoming one of us is radically new: a new baptism, a new day. John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness at the water’s edge, “Repent!”

How do we prepare for this event? How do we prepare for the coming of this most honored guest? Let's think for a moment, what do we know about Christ? What does Christ like? What has Christ given to us that has somehow slipped to the back of our drawer and been all but forgotten. Or perhaps we were never really all that fond of Christ's gift, if we are really honest. Here's what we know: Christ came to save us from our sins (yay) and to enlist our help to save the whole world (whoa). You heard Isaiah: valleys lifted, mountains made low: beautiful poetry about radical change (that is now hard to separate apart from the beautiful tune of Handel's Messiah). Isaiah is heralding God's way, where peace and justice, especially for the underdogs, reign supreme.

To become "People of the Way"—we are called to let God melt away our old self-destructive ways of thinking and being, the ways we beat up on ourselves and others, the ways we love to lick our wounds and turn our backs on people who have done us wrong or with whom we disagree. John the Baptist is calling us to another way, a way that begins with a power shift; a way that starts always with the humble position to which we are all called: "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." And yet, this is John the Baptist, the one who is paired with Christ – in his birth, and in some ways his sacrificial and violent death. This pairing of Christ and John the Baptist follows the tradition of Moses and Aaron, David and Jonathon, Elijah and Elisha, Ezra and Nehemiah, Peter and Paul in Acts. And it breaks tradition, in that we are called into the pairing, that partnership in place of John. Again we see the continuity and the discontinuity. We may not have to eat locusts and honey and wear camel hair (thank God) but we are being called to "Prepare the Way" yoked with Christ, who is the Way.

Are we ready to be preparers of the way, angels in the Isaiah stream shouting, "Here is your God!" or in the John the Baptist stream, "Repent"! John the Baptist didn't really know what to expect beyond his prophetic visions. But we do. Jesus, the Word made flesh, has come and gone from this earth. How has his coming, his first Advent, changed us?

- If we're getting ready to make the same mistakes, to keep spinning our wheels in the same ruts of resentment, rushing to judgment, ranting against what we don't understand, then we don't need to repent.
- If we want to keep being mad at the family member or friend we stopped speaking to years ago but can't remember why, then we don't need to repent.
- If we want to keep railing against the politicians we love to hate and fail to use our power as citizens to voice our concerns to those in power, with our votes, our dollars, our footsteps, then we don't need to repent.

Do you ever wonder why Christ has not come again, yet? That was a big disappointment and puzzlement for the "People of the Way" in that first century. Here we are twenty centuries later and we may be wondering too: why hasn't Christ come again? Maybe there's more bulldozing and reconstruction yet to do. If you

think about it, “getting saved” is the easier part—God does that for us. It’s the essential beginning. But preparing the way for the Lord, being Christ’s hands and feet to walk the walk of saving the world: that’s the hard part. What are we doing or not doing that is hindering the way of the Lord? This is an important question for individuals, families, our church, our community, our nation, the world.

In September, a United Nations agency warned that 40.3 million people across the globe were subject to some form of modern slavery and 152 million children were subject to child labor in 2016. And about 28.7 million of this group is women or girls forced into sex, marriage or labor. This week, with the continued revelations about politicians and celebrities abusing their power by sexual misconduct, I’ve wondered if this truth telling coming to light about abhorrent behavior on the part of the politically powerful (from both parties) is one sign of hills made low, and valleys being lifted up? Perhaps. What is absolutely clear is this: If we look at the increasing economic disparities, the sin of racism, the refugee crisis, the abuse of our one and only planet, we know we have a lot of repenting to do. We the people of the way, paired with the One who came to show us the path, to show us how God makes a way out of no way.

Where to start? Right here: You and I, From Baby Luna Tucker to our longest living member, Margaret Fornafelt, and all of us in between. Christ has called us into community to walk forward together, as people of the way who listen and learn from one another. Together let us spend time “Preparing the Way” as we get ready for Christmas. Where do we place that bulldozer? Put on your hard hat, and pick one issue that tugs on your heart: pray, give time, money, pray more, organize with others to mobilize and take action. That’s a great way to get ready for our most honored guest, Christ Jesus. Along with the presents and the cookies.

Yes, Christmas is coming! And so is Christ. Let’s get ready.