

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.” *Mark 1:1-8*

Since mid-October, our Zoom Bible Study group has been reading the Gospel of Mark.

We read a section of scripture and then ask questions of the text and notice how it applies in our own lives. It did not take us long to notice that Mark wastes no time. Many sentences begin with the word “immediately” and he begins his Gospel just as we heard it this morning. There is no time spent on remembering Jesus’ family history or the events of his birth. We don’t hear who his people are. No. He just tells what happens at a breakneck pace; it’s as if he knows he doesn’t have much time. In contrast, our Bible Study group takes plenty of time to explore the text from many angles and wonder about things and get to know Jesus and the disciples as they share the good news of the kingdom. I think Mark probably wrote the whole Gospel in the time it’s taken us to get to chapter five!

We are one week into the season of Advent and the new church year and Mark’s gospel will be our focus for most of the year with a few brief visits to John’s gospel – one of which will be next week. We always get a double dose of John the Baptizer in Advent and we’ll hear more about him next week from John the gospeler’s point of view.

This week we begin at the beginning. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark is clear about the purpose of his writing. Mark is a strategic storyteller, writing during or just after the Jewish revolt against Roman imperial occupation. The temple has been destroyed yet again, evil, desolation and violence are everywhere, and Mark and his community are in need of hope.

It often appears that evil has the upper hand, doesn’t it? Loss and change and grief are as inevitable as they’ve always been. Even in our world today, there is much to be feared, and we have to wait longer and search farther to find our hope, sometimes thinking there is none.

But Mark tells us otherwise. He reminds us that the kingdom of God has come near. He tells the story of the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah as promised by the ancestors and prophets of Israel; the good news of the anointed one who will rescue and restore God’s people.

Though he quotes Isaiah, Mark’s opening lines of prophecy are actually a combination of images his listeners would have been familiar with; images from Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi. He writes using the same term as the Greek translation of Genesis 1:1, “in the beginning.” It’s as if Mark is saying, “Behold, just as in the former days, God is beginning, creating, remaking the world.” The Exodus image is of divine guidance along the way to the promised land; Isaiah’s image is the promise of a joyous return home from Babylonian exile; and Malachi’s image is of a messenger sent ahead of God’s imminent arrival.

Taken together, these images show us what Jesus is all about: his presence inaugurates a new beginning, an exodus from every captivity, and the promise of a new kingdom of peace, justice, and restoration for all.

John the Baptist is an integral part of the story, appearing in the wilderness to proclaim this good news, pointing to the one who is more powerful than he, more powerful than any of us. John is the messenger, sent to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight. He gives us some instructions for how we might do this, and they involve repentance and forgiveness; they involve baptism both by water and the Holy Spirit.

There is no better time than Advent for us to proclaim the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We can do this by intentionally choosing to prepare the way, by being open to God's presence, not only in our own lives but in the lives of those around us. We make paths straight when we notice and respond to the needs of others in our families, in our church, and in our community. We make uneven ground level when we work for justice, freedom and peace. We make the rough places a plain when we respect the dignity of every human being. These are promises we make at our baptism; promises we live into for the rest of our lives.

Being open to God's presence takes intention. We can start within ourselves as we take some time each day to be still, perhaps light a candle, and listen for the voice of God. We can read scripture, pray, and ask God to show us what might be getting in the way, interrupting our awareness of God. There will always be obstacles in the way, from the events of our own busy days and complicated relationships to the global concerns of a world in need.

Perhaps it is good to be reminded that the Messiah is neither a military conqueror nor a conventional king. Instead, he is a prophet, healer, and teacher whose saving work gives us an even deeper form of liberation, a freedom from any captivity that separates us from God. Jesus shows us a kingdom way of life that offers hope, renewal, and restoration.

The good news has been proclaimed, from creation to the promised land, to the return from exile, to now. The words written ages ago by the psalmist are true. God has been drawing near since the beginning, speaking peace to faithful people and to those who turn their hearts. Truly, God's salvation is very near.

How will we know when God is near? Pastor and author Frederick Buechner gives us one way to recognize this truth. "Pay attention to the things that bring a tear to your eye or put a lump in your throat, because they are signs that the holy is drawing near."

And that is our work in Advent and always – to pay attention, to look for the holy, so that when it is time, we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.