

# In the Wilderness

Mark 1: 1-8

Second Sunday in Advent

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Advent is the season when the church holds its breath in anticipation and expectation of the fresh coming of God into the world. The church's calendar is marked by the expectancy and preparation for the inbreaking of God, for the fulfillment of God's promises. This morning we lit the candle of "Peace." It will certainly take a fresh inbreaking of the Prince of Peace to smooth out the rough places in our world and in our lives this year.

In recent memory, this year has been like no other. It's an anxious time. Worried about our health and the country's future, many have made major decisions about their lives. It's an uncertain time with instability in our family lives, our emotional lives, our economic lives, our social lives, even in our spiritual lives. Worshiping online virtually just doesn't feel the same as previous celebrations of Advent and Christmas. As the year draws to a close, there is a desire to see all of this in the rearview mirror, and to get on with our lives, and back to normal. Our hope may be in a vaccine to end this pandemic but that is quite different from the hope of Advent.

We need some good news, just as they did in the first century. They also were facing one crisis after another. The year 70CE was like no other. People were divided. Some radical Jews revolted against the government and Jerusalem was under siege. The Temple was destroyed. Some hoped for leaders who would rise up and push the infidel Romans from the Holy City. Others urged submission for the sake of security and peace. Everyone was anxious, caught between heavy-handed soldiers and extremist guerillas. The Emperor Nero died, and four different contenders were acclaimed as emperor, only to be assassinated. Now Vespasian, the very general besieging Jerusalem, was crowned. What will this mean for the country? Things could not be more uncertain. Tensions abound between Jews and Gentiles. Families fractured along ethnic lines. Into this boiling cauldron one group of believers is proclaiming good news: that God has acted to fulfill the promised coming of the Messiah in Jesus Christ, a savior who died almost 40 years earlier, but did not stay dead.

Mark's Gospel begins very differently than the other three gospels in the New Testament. It begins in the wilderness, simply proclaiming, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." There is nothing of the theatrical birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, with hosts of angels singing and bright lights in the night sky and shepherds and wisemen gathering to witness the arrival. There is no attempt to connect this beginning to the beginning of all creation, as with John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

There is little fanfare in this text. Mark begins with a sentence that almost sounds like it is the heading or title. Some biblical scholars describe this gospel as "a passion narrative with a long introduction."<sup>1</sup> And that introduction begins with a quick turn to a story about another messenger, John the Baptist in the wilderness. It seems to me that is where we find ourselves this morning, in the wilderness. So, it is fitting that today we consider how good news can begin in the wilderness.

It almost appears as if the "good news" begins with the forerunners of Jesus. Kind of like the handing off the baton in a relay race. God is acting in human history, as in the past, and as promised. Isaiah foretold it. John the Baptist proclaimed it. The baton comes from Elijah, through Isaiah, to John the Baptist and then to Jesus.

There is a story told about a newly-elected CEO who met with his predecessor for the first time. On the desk in his new office were three envelopes numbered 1, 2, and 3. The former CEO instructed the newly-elected one to open the envelopes one at a time in sequence, but only when there was a crisis that he didn't know how to handle. Things went along well for the first year, so the letters remained unopened but soon the company was in a liquidity crisis. As instructed, the CEO carefully opened the first envelope. It read simply, "Blame it on your predecessor." And so, the CEO blamed the problem on the former CEO and it worked beautifully, they emerged from the crisis alright. Things went along fine for a couple more years and then another crisis developed with a power struggle that was very difficult, so the CEO opened the second letter which read, "Restructure." The CEO began a complete restructuring of the company, combining

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1 *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on NRSV-Year B* (Louisville, KY Westminster John Knox, 1993) p. 20

departments and creating new ones, changing reporting and supervisory roles. And it worked beautifully. The company survived and was able prosper again.

Then a few years later a third unmanageable crisis occurred with the board and so the CEO opened the third letter. It read simply, "Prepare three letters." I've never forgotten that story. It reminds me that no one is indispensable. All of us have forerunners and successors. We may want to think that history began when we arrived on the scene, or in the job, but the fact is, each of us carry the baton only for a limited time and then it's someone else who runs the next leg of the relay. Even Jesus had forerunners preparing the way for him.

I'm certainly feeling that way as retirement approaches. This year reading about John the Baptist, I can relate to his message, "The one coming after me is more powerful than I."

Some years ago, while traveling in the South of France, our family visited the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France. As we walked from room to room and painting to painting, periodically our docent would ask our little group if we could describe the subject matter captured by the artist. She seemed surprised every time someone was able to identify a biblical character in a painting or sculpture. We approached a famous altarpiece known by many simply as "the Grunewald" but also called the "Issenheim" altarpiece, probably painted around 1515 (over 500 years ago!). It is especially treasured by the Germans, who visit the museum in large numbers every year.

When our guide asked, "Who is the man in the red robe holding the book in his left hand and pointing with his right index finger," I immediately replied, "That's John the Baptist." She looked astonished and asked further, "What makes you say that?" To which I replied, "He is dressed in the rough clothing of the wilderness, holding the scriptures (probably open to the prophet Isaiah) and is pointing toward the Lord." Her surprise that I could identify John the Baptist was matched by my surprise that apparently the average visitor to the museum had forgotten how to interpret their own art because they were no longer familiar with the biblical story that inspired it. (By the way, Rev. Ralph Hamburger, who was German, gave me a picture of it after hearing me tell this story.)

Christian faith and art history remember John the Baptist because he reawakened hope in the promises of God. He called people to repent of their hopelessness (and he did it in the wilderness), to turn from their sins, and take God seriously again. Christian hope is envisioned in the midst of present adversity by those who catch a glimpse of what, by faith, can yet happen. It is not based upon possibilities inherent in the situation. It is based upon the promise of God. According to the New Testament Book of Hebrews, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . By faith, we understand that the worlds were prepared by the Word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”<sup>2</sup> Hope believes that a new beginning will emerge by God’s faithfulness, even in the midst of whatever mess we happen to be in. It is the belief that, even in this God-forsaken situation, in this wilderness, a new beginning will emerge. So, we must continue to live faithfully through adversity and trust in the Lord.

Hope. We often think of hope as nothing more than something to look forward to: a trip to Europe, a Christmas homecoming, a new arrival in the family. But all of those things assume that, in due course, what we want will come about. In truth, hoping for what we want is really more akin to wishing than anything else, or even setting some kind of goal, not an unimportant activity — but not hope.

No, this kind of hope is hoping for more than we have ever known. Hope begins not apart from reality but embedded in it. It begins with the all too vivid reminder that we cannot do this ourselves, that we cannot wave a magic wand of peace, that we cannot make things right. It begins daily in defeat. That is where faith and hope and love always begin, everyday. And that is how they become so powerful.

You see, people like us may find it easy to fall under the illusion that we can get by with mere wishing, that if we wish hard enough and work hard enough, we will preserve our own lives, be our own saviors, we will succeed. And often we are right. We do succeed in a way; we “have our reward”, as Jesus tells us. Only, we lose hope.

Who can straighten out this mess that our world has become? We dare not be naïve about the world. It is a broken, twisted, and sometimes, violent place. Faith understands that. Our hope

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:1,3

is not based on the way the world is but what, by God's grace, it will become. The Church points to her Lord with hope and confidence that a new beginning will emerge because of God's faithfulness — just like John the Baptist in the Grunewald altar piece.

Every so often, the ordinary becomes the bearer of something extraordinary. John the Baptist was a nobody living in the wilderness, to whom the Word of the Lord came. Every year we read about John the Baptist, this prophet who prepares the way of the Lord. God is coming to straighten out what is crooked and twisted in human life. John's message is judgment is approaching; repent and be baptized; embrace your God-given responsibilities before it is too late.

The almighty and everlasting God *has* come and *is* coming to help us most where we can help ourselves least, where we are broken and powerless against forces within us and forces around us. God is making straight a way through our wilderness.

Many of us long for a different experience of life. The world around us, and within us, just seems to get twisted into grotesque forms, distorting human life and community into destructive patterns. There is a new beginning, by God's grace, that began long ago in a quiet and unremarkable place. And it seemed that the entire creation held its breath. Since then, people have found new beginnings within themselves and it has affected how they lived with others around them. All of it is centered in this one, Jesus Christ.

In another wilderness long ago, the people of God began a journey from slavery toward the land of promise. And the Lord fed them with manna from heaven to sustain them on the journey. Jesus, reenacting that meal with his disciples, fed them with new hope for a future that belongs to God. Every so often, the ordinary becomes the bearer of something extraordinary. We come to this table, the Lord's Table and this sacred meal this morning, to be nourished in that same hope! We come as people of faith with “ . . .the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” So let us come to this table that we may receive from the Lord that which nourishes and satisfies human life — and launches us again in the Advent of new beginnings with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen



