

“The Beginning of God’s Good News”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent II – December 6, 2020

Mark 1: 1-8

What does it take to peak your interest in something? If you’re reading a book, it’s usually those first 10-15 pages that are critical if you’re going to stay engaged and want to keep reading. If it’s a movie, it’s usually that introductory scene that has to grab your attention if you’re going to let your mind fully immerse yourself in the story that’s before you. If it’s meeting someone for the first time, more often than not, you need to have a sense of connection in those first few minutes of talking – otherwise your brain gets distracted and you start mindlessly nodding while thinking how you can get yourself out of this awkward conversation!

I’m someone who has a hard time turning my brain off when I’m trying to read a book for pleasure. I’ll sit down and start reading, but unless what I’m reading really reels me in, my mind starts wandering to what I have to get done tomorrow, or replaying what happened earlier in the day, or dreaming about one day going on a trip – that’s what I call “pandemic dreaming.” I envy those folks who are able to immerse themselves in a book – my daughter, Heather, is one of those people – and just lose themselves in a way that is renewing and refreshing. For me, I have to really work at it, because it can be hard for me to let go of all the other pressures and demands that are swirling around in my head.

Perhaps therein lies a parallel for us in this Season of Advent. Our minds are racing to figure out how to get everything done on our holiday to-do list, especially in the midst of a pandemic. Our hearts are heavy as we struggle to decide how to be connected with family and friends in safe and responsible ways. Our lives are stressed to the limit as we yearn for some normalcy amid financial, health, and family concerns.

The same goes for our life in the church. We become focused on making sure every event’s last detail is covered. We face ever-increasing needs of our members and neighbors in the community. The to-do list becomes longer and longer, but we don’t want to miss something or make a mistake. All in the midst of living our collective life of faith in an ever-changing way due to health and safety concerns. There’s so much swirling around in our collective heads that it can be hard to truly be reeled in and immersed in the Advent story. It can be hard to stop and listen and hear what God has to say to us this day.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

That is how Mark gets our attention. That is how the gospel writer begins his book. That is what calls to us amid our swirling thoughts and

hurried lives, and says, “Stop. Listen. Here is good news.” It is the beginning of God’s good news for the world.

The beginning of Mark’s story actually goes back to an earlier time before Jesus. For those in the first century who would have heard this for the first time, their interest would have been peaked by the words that came after that introductory statement: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah . . .” This good news that Mark was introducing was rooted in the Jewish people’s ancestors; it is a fulfillment of what God had promised them in the past.

And we’ll forgive the gospel writer for getting a little carried away by saying that these all came from Isaiah, because in fact, they come from three different Old Testament writings. “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way,” actually references both the prophet Malachi (3:1), as well as the book of Exodus, when God promises Moses a messenger who will guide the people along their wilderness journey out of Egypt (Exodus 23:20). “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” does refer to Isaiah 40, as the prophet foretells a way home for the Israelites out of their Babylonian exile. But in all of these cases, the Jewish people who heard this would have recognized that this good news came from their past, especially as this Jesus is called “the Christ”, which meant anointed one and Messiah.

Then, almost out of nowhere, comes the next announcer of God’s good news: John the Baptist. Forgive me, but the way Mark writes it almost sounds like a magic act: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness!” Poof! Here he is! And all of these people are coming to hear John – “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” City people and rural folk, old and young, rich and poor – they all were drawn to this man out by the River Jordan.

Was he offering them materials things, like food and clothing and money? Far from it. This unkempt, hairy man, who wore a coat made of camel’s hair, and ate delicious locusts for protein, was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” What John was preaching is not unlike what Malachi spoke of in his prophecy: a refiner’s fire that will purify God’s people to return to the Lord. As they were baptized in the waters of the Jordan, they were reminded of the new life they were called to in faithfulness to the Lord their God.

Just as the words of the prophet Isaiah would have reminded first-century Jews of God’s promises, so too would John the Baptist have reminded them of a leader from their past. Elijah was a figure from Israel’s history who was often described as a “hairy man with a leather belt around his waist” (2 Kings 1:8). And as one commentator puts it, “The portrayal of John as an Elijah presence heightens awareness of the apocalyptic overtones of the presentation, recalling not only the saving

activity of God in the past, but also the understanding that with Elijah all prophecy ceased – until the coming of the Messiah” (Judy Yates Siker, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 47).

John’s role in announcing God’s good news is twofold. On the one hand, John is stating clearly what is required of God’s people to receive this good news embodied in God’s only Son. It will require repentance – a turning away from sin, and a turning back to God – so that hearts and souls can fully receive this good news. Through baptism and confession, John prepared his followers for this anointed one of God.

On the other hand, though, John wanted to make clear that he was not that anointed one. More than likely, those who came from the Judean countryside and the city of Jerusalem mistakenly thought John was Elijah, whom they had read and heard about from their faith tradition. John makes clear he is not Elijah, and also that he is not the one whom God is sending. “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’m sure John was tempted to be the center of the show – the alpha and the omega, so to speak – and could have easily taken all of this notoriety, feeding his ego, and forget his purpose in God’s good news. Thankfully, John stays grounded, and reminds all of us what God’s anointed one will do: “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Lillian Daniel writes: *People who are willing to follow someone at least want the reassurance that they are following the right person, and not wasting their time. Who wants to follow the one who is preparing the way for someone else? From a management perspective, John probably should have kept his thoughts about better and future saviors to himself, at least until they had all agreed on a smooth transition plan.*

But John is not operating from a management perspective; he is a servant of God. Therefore, as a servant, he has no leadership technique – just the call to tell the truth . . . Thank God for freaks like that. Thank God for freaks who refuse to buy the publicity the world throws their way and trust instead in God’s proclamation. Had John not prepared the way, and then admitted it, Advent would be a season not of waiting but of mistakenly believing it has all been accomplished by the latest guru. And that would have been a short season, I suspect, not one we would remember two thousand years later. For charismatic godly figures come and go, from Isaiah to John. In fact, preparers of the way are still around. We may be preparers ourselves.

But there is only one savior of the world. And in Advent, we are still waiting (*ibid*, 46-48).

I would call John the Baptist the ultimate interim pastor. His call is to force the people to examine their lives in a new way, in order to prepare for the one whom God is sending to them. He is not concerned with his own ego – his primary concern is laying the best groundwork

possible for God's children to accept, believe, and follow God's good news. Whenever the light shines on him, he redirects the light to shine on Jesus the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah.

What would it look like if we all sought to be preparers for God's good news? Instead of seeing our work or vocation as what we are accomplishing now, what if we viewed it as preparing the way for those who will follow us? Through our calling and vocation, are we leaving our workplaces, our families, our churches in a better place than when we started, so that those who follow us will be better prepared for a flourishing life? As we wait for God's good news, are we taking all the steps we can to point others to God's anointed one – or have we lost the ability to be a preparer as John was, due to selfishness, ego, and a loss of focus?

Lillian Daniel continues: *Waiting for the savior is humbling. It forces us to admit that the world does not operate on our schedule. And by waiting for the savior, we have to admit the obvious: that he is not here yet. If he is not here yet, that pretty much rules out the possibility that the savior is one of us. It guarantees that it is not me (ibid, 48).*

Stop. Listen. Wait. This is the beginning of God's good news to the world. Be a preparer of this good news. Point others in God's direction. And know that God's anointed – the Messiah – is coming.

Thanks be to God. Amen.