

Preparers of the Way

Mark 1:1-8

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I.

Mark's gospel begins like a messenger out of breath. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

His message to the early church is urgent: In order to move forward, we've got to look back. "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah..."

Why does Mark invoke an ancient prophet to begin his gospel account? I imagine it is for the same reason many present-day preachers and politicians include in their sermons and speeches quotes of Martin Luther King, Jr. In a time of great adversity, Dr. King provided a clear voice that was inspired and inspiring, creative and applicable. For the early church, Isaiah was that sort of voice. The scroll of Isaiah contained words of an ancient prophet whose words sparked light in the current gloom. The poetry of Isaiah slaked the thirst of a people thirsty for newness.

What Mark attributes solely to Isaiah, in fact comes from several sources. "See, I am sending messenger ahead of you..." The image of sending a messenger ahead of the people comes from Exodus, chapter 23, verse 20. There God tells the wandering Israelites, "I am going to send an angel in front of you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared."

The image of a messenger preparing the way for the people out of the scroll of Malachi, chapter 3, verse 1: "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me."

Only verse three of Mark's first chapter is drawn from Isaiah. From chapter 40, verse 3: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

Mark draws upon a rich history within ancient Israel. A history of looking back to the times when the people had to begin again. A history of getting back to basics, of preparing the way for God to break into the life of the world. A history of saying again and again, repent, turn aside, look

back, see the things of old with new eyes. A history of looking forward while proclaiming that God is, once again, on the move. A history of behaving as if God holds us accountable for our action and our inaction.

II.

Advent is the season of beginning. This is the new year of the Christian church. It is a time when, for Christians, the world begins again. And it is a time when we reconsider our conception of time.

Society calls this time of year “the Holidays.” Since Christmas is so tied up with memories of childhood, we are tempted to think that nostalgia is the reason for the season. The word nostalgia comes from two Greek words. *Nostos* means “homecoming” and *algos* refers to pain or grief. I think of nostalgia is that sweet and painful return to a childhood home of memory and belonging. Christmastide is full of it.

Consider the cherished Christmas tree ornament that was referred to in my childhood home simply as “the stick.” I created “the stick” in 1977. I was 5 years old and attending the Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont. Creating “the stick” entailed painting white a prefabricated piece of furniture wood, then asking a teacher to tie a red piece of yarn through a predrilled hole at the top. One year, my sister Michal and I decided that the austere beauty of “the stick” required a more majestic presentation. We decided that the stick should be the among the last ornaments to be placed on the tree. Only the two crocheted angels and the crowning angel made from straw would come after the stick. The stick, we decided, would be presented on a platter, covered with a cloth. One of us would hold the platter. Together we would walk in the step together, step together pattern used in some formal wedding processions. And we would sing a song appropriate to the occasion: The Star-Spangled Banner. With the words, “Oe’er the land of the free and the home of the brave,” we would enact the denouement of the ceremony by hanging “the stick” in a prominent place among the other ornaments of the tree.

This memory gives me a lot of pleasure, as do many memories at this time of year. But the Christian liturgical calendar begins with Advent and the season of Advent provides not so subtle reminders that to prepare for Christmas, that is, to prepare for the Feast of the Incarnation, requires a letting go and a dying. During Advent, we let go of our tendency to think that life is all about us, that all of history has led to its fulfillment in us. During Advent, we die to our insistence that the way the world is now is the way that it will always be. During Advent, we kindle hope. Not just a

sentimental hope that patiently waits for things to be otherwise. But a sustainable hope that, with eyes wide open and body fully awake, actively engages with the world.

III.

John the baptizer is not the most Christmas-y of people. His retro fashion instincts and uncouth dietary preferences are legendary. Whose grandmother ever whipped up a batch of honey locust crunch cookies for the holidays? From the outset of Mark, we must realize that the gospel is a new riff on an old story and that the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” is, for the church, the crucial take on that old old story.

While many refer to the Hebrew Scriptures and the Old Testament as one in the same, the two collections are arranged differently and therefore convey different theologies. Anticipating the lecture of Amy-Jill Levine in June, we will be considering the similarities and differences between Jews and Christians over the coming months. While the Jewish Tanakh ends with II Chronicles, chapter 36, verse 23: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem...” The Christian Old Testament ends with Malachi, chapter 4, verse 5: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah...” In Jewish thought, the prophet Elijah will return to usher in the age of the Messiah.

So, whom did the early church regard John the Baptist to be? Elijah, returned to prepare the way for the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God. To drive the point home, Mark draws from a description of the prophet Elijah in the Book of Second Kings, chapter 1, verses 7 and 8: “What sort of man was he...?” “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.” According to Mark, the prophet of old, Elijah, has returned in John the Baptist to prepare the way. He “appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). Appearing in the wilderness, dressed like a wild man, this messenger is not a representative of the centers of religious or political powers. His ministry is in the wilderness, where God is not boxed in by human structures. The one he points to is the one who will shatter expectations, in some senses the “anti-Messiah” who will die in order to save.

IV.

If you’re like me, it’s hard to know what to make of this story. If John was Elijah returned and if Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, then what are we doing here, spinning our wheels, 2000 years later? If the Messiah

has arrived, why haven't things improved? If the Messiah has arrived, why will our county close "The Lighthouse," the only facility capable to help drug addicts and alcoholics detox? If the Messiah has arrived, why has the national unemployment rate reached 6.7%, the highest since 1974? If the Messiah has arrived, why can terrorists arrive by boat in Mumbai and kill 171 people?

This is my question and I don't yet have a satisfying answer to it. So why hope and how, given these daunting realities of our world, can we cultivate a hope that will sustain us? The alternatives to hope are either despair or complacency, which are in some sense the same thing. How, in the coming years, do we choose and follow the path of hope in mind, body, and spirit?

I once heard someone describe the difference between eastern and western religions in terms of their view of time. Eastern religions, epitomized by the Buddhist Wheel of Life and the Hindu notion of the divya-yuga, grand epochs which repeat every 4,320,000 years, view time as cyclical. The doctrine of karma asserts, colloquially put, that what goes around comes around. Western religions - Christianity, Judaism, and Islam - adhere to a linear view of reality as, for example, in the History of Salvation.

But the Advent season reminds us of the cyclical nature of history. The message of the Christian liturgical calendar is that it's never too late to begin all over again. The message of Advent is that Christ is about to come among us. We become the ones who look back and remember how God has shown up in the most dire of circumstances. We become preparers of the way. We become the ones who say over and over again, love, not war, peace and justice, not bigotry, tribalism, and hate. And we have to say it over and over again because no one else will. God comes into the world not to destroy the world, but to redeem it.

Christ is coming. Prepare the way for others. Proclaim the good news over and over again. Till you're out of breath. Till you're blue in the face. The wilderness is vast. Cry out. Prepare the way. Create a path that others can join. Repent. Turn aside. Look back and remember. We are not alone and we cannot do it alone. Prepare the way. Amen.