

Advent 2B 2014 Sermon

Much of this sermon is taken from a commentary on today's Gospel by John Shea, found in *Eating with the Bridegroom: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 24-28

Mark 1:1-8

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.”

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

That is how today's Gospel reading begins. But most Bible scholars believe that this is not actually the first *sentence* of Mark's Gospel, but rather that Mark meant it as a Title for his whole book. The whole book is “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This makes all the *more* sense when we realize that scholars also believe that Mark's Gospel originally ended with the women running away from the empty tomb frightened. No one ever sees the risen Christ in Mark's Gospel; it is we who are to encounter the risen Christ. The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is an open-ended story **to** which everyone who has ever tried to follow Christ must add their own, ongoing story. As John Shea notes, “This is a story of a beginning that has no ending.” (p. 24) It is crucial for us to remember this as we read through Mark's Gospel in this coming year: we are a part of the *continuing* story of the Gospel; **we** are characters in the Gospel story that has no end.

Nor does the Gospel story begin with John the Baptist, or even with Jesus' birth. If the first sentence of Mark's Gospel is really the title, then Mark's Gospel actually begins with a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark begins hundreds of years *before* Jesus' birth, with an Old Testament prophet. (Later Gospels will push the beginning even further back: Matthew will trace the Christ-story back to Abraham, Luke even further, to Adam and Eve, and John even further – before the world was

created. But today we deal with Mark.) Mark begins with Isaiah foretelling the coming of John the Baptist, saying, “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 Baptist *looks* like the Old Testament prophets, lives in the wilderness just as they did, eats their desert food, and preaches their message of repentance, “echoing God’s eternal plea, ‘Come back to me.’” (*ibid.*, p. 25)

John Shea writes: “As a prophet, John’s primary work is freeing people from their identification with sin.” Fr. Shea defines “sin” as “any thought, deed, or disposition that breaks the **flow** of *life* between God and the self, as well as between the self, other people and the earth.” [repeat] John the Baptist calls people “to change their minds (interiors) and behaviors (exteriors) and to experience and symbolize this change in the act of baptism, going under the water to die to sin and emerging above the water open to the sky.” (Remember: **John’s** baptism is about repentance; it is not yet Christian Baptism. See Acts 19:3-6.) “This [repentance] is a strenuous undertaking,” Fr. Shea notes. “It entails courageous self-examination, and it can be a rigorous and exhausting affair... To shake off the shackles of the past, to walk away from destructive habits and alliances, to say ‘no’ to what has mastered a person for so long *could* seem like the finish line, a successful conclusion to a long process.

“This is precisely the impression John [the Baptist] does **not** want to give. Therefore, he witnesses to the incompleteness of himself and his work. He does not want his newly baptized people thinking they are a ‘completed conversion.’ The mission is not accomplished. All that has happened is: now people are ready.” John helps people to be ready.

Advent is a penitential season, and this is why: it is all about getting *ready*. “Make his paths straight,” as Isaiah says. Clear away the brush, remove the deadwood from the path.

With great insight, John Shea explains what this metaphor of “making straight the path” does NOT mean:

“Often path images are developed from the point of view of the traveler,” he writes. “In order to arrive at a desired destination, the one journeying has to deal with fallen branches, stones, landslides, etc. But in the ‘path’ image of the prophecy that John quotes, the obstacles are not in the way of the one **journeying** but in the way of the one **arriving**. Someone wants to come toward people, but he or she is blocked by the ‘fallen branches, stones, landslides, etc.’ ...the path is twisted. The point of making straight the path is for someone to smoothly and straightforwardly **arrive**...” We don’t clear the path so that **we** can get to God; we clear and straighten the path so that God can get to us. God did not make the path crooked nor fill it with obstacles; we did, and it is we who must clear and straighten the path that we twisted and littered.

“God and the ones who manifest God’s love are very proactive,” Dr. Shea notes. “They come after people. People do not have to search them out. In Mark’s Gospel, although Jesus hides from the *celebrity* that accompanies his teaching, exorcisms, and healings, he is, at the same time, *driven* to reach out to all people. What people must do is learn to wait and welcome. If people empty themselves of sin, they **will** wait and welcome the Holy Spirit whom Jesus brings. In this way John’s work is essential preparation for the reception of the more powerful one, the thong of whose sandals John is not worthy to untie.”

Dr. Shea tells of a time he was teaching seminarians a course in spirituality. “Two priests who were visiting the seminary asked if they could sit in on the class,” Shea writes. “I agreed, and afterwards... one of the priests said, ‘I never knew what spirituality was until I went through AA.’”

“‘You know remarks like that make those of us in seminary formation and teaching wonder if we are getting *anything* across,’ [Fr. Shea] replied.

“‘Oh, there was nothing wrong with the programs I had in my seminary years,’ the priest replied. ‘The problem was me. I wasn’t ready.’”

Fr. Shea remarks: “When he was a seminarian, the priest had been exposed to many opportunities for spiritual formation. But he seized none of them. He wasn’t ready...”

“This question of readiness may be a partial answer to why the teachings of Jesus fell on many deaf ears. People had not let go of sin, so they could not embrace grace. They had not undergone John’s baptism, so they were not open to Jesus’ banquet. It is not just a matter of *exposure* to Christ. It is a matter of what we are able to let in, of what we can truly hear and integrate. [repeat] ...What has to happen to the person so they are *ready* for the revelation, so they absorb what they hear?...”

Many people find the practice of silence, stillness, prayer and meditation to be vital preparation for the revelation; preparation for absorbing what we hear. Some of us, myself included, have found a regular practice of Centering Prayer to be life-changing. It is one way to clear away our racing thoughts and emotions, which tend to be a major source of deadwood on the path between God and us. That emptying allows God to come to us, abide in us, pray **in** us and **through** us. Fr. Thomas Keating says that in Centering Prayer we practice our “intent to consent to the presence of God”. To “consent to the presence of God” is precisely to make straight the Lord’s path to our hearts! We are hoping to offer another introductory course on Centering Prayer here at Christ Church in January, and I encourage you to attend.

Advent is about getting ready. What has to happen to you so you will be ready for the revelation, so you will absorb what you hear when the Word of God comes to you? If you stop for a moment to reflect, you probably already know what deadwood needs to be cleared, what needs to be let go, what needs to be surrendered, what twists in the path from God to you need to be straightened. I encourage you to take that moment to reflect this Advent, to take the steps needed to make straight the path of the Lord to your heart. On Christmas Eve we will sing, "Let every heart prepare him room!" – but **now** is the time to prepare, so that when He comes, the path will already be straight and clear. For as John the Baptist tells us (and he is only quoting a long-ago prophet), **preparing** the way of the Lord is crucial, because it truly **does** begin *before* it begins.

Advent is about clearing and straightening the path for God to come into our lives. Let every heart prepare Him room!

AMEN