

Advent 2B 2017 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*¹

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. In other words, 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 NOT with any appearance of Jesus after his resurrection, but rather with the women running away from the empty tomb frightened. The reason that no one ever sees the risen Christ in Mark's Gospel is because Mark wants us to realize that **we** are the ones who are to encounter the risen Christ in our *own* lives, in our *own* day. The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is an open-ended story **to** which everyone who follows Christ must add their own, ongoing story. As Fr. John Shea notes, “This is a story of a beginning that has no ending.”¹ It is crucial for us to remember this as we read through Mark's Gospel in our Sunday worship this coming year: **we** are a part of the *continuing* story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; **we** are real-life characters in a Gospel story that has no end.

And note that does Mark's Gospel does *not* begin with John the Baptist, or even with Jesus' birth. If the first sentence of Mark's Gospel is really the title of the book, then the *text* of Mark's Gospel actually begins with a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who, hundreds of years *before* Jesus' birth, foretold 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 *dresses* 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.’”²

John Shea writes: “As a prophet, John [the Baptist’s] primary work is freeing people from their identification with sin.”² 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.”³ [repeat] John the Baptist calls people to repent, “to change their minds... and behaviors... 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... This [change of one’s mind and behavior] ...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.*”⁴ John the Baptist helps people to be ready.

Advent is all about getting *ready*. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” 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**...”⁵ 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 (though we can ask God’s help in doing so!).

“God and the ones who manifest God’s love are very proactive,” Fr. 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 [what the mystics called ‘the purgative way,’] they **will** wait and welcome the Holy Spirit whom Jesus brings. In this way John [the Baptist’s] work is *essential* preparation for the reception of the more powerful one, the thong of whose sandals John is not worthy to untie.”⁶

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,” Fr. Shea writes. “I agreed, and afterwards... one of the priests said, ‘I never knew what spirituality was until I went through AA.’ ... [T]here was nothing wrong with the programs I had in my seminary years,’ the priest [said]. ‘The problem was me. I wasn’t ready.’

“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 [of repentance], so they were not open to *Jesus’ banquet* [of grace]. 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 [a] person so they are *ready* for the revelation, so they absorb what they hear?...”⁷ What has to happen to you and me, so that the Christ child can come into our hearts – and not just at Christmas, but throughout the year?

Many people find the practice of silence, stillness, prayer and meditation to be vital preparation for the revelation; preparation for receiving the One who comes. Some of us, myself included, have found a regular practice of Centering Prayer to be life-changing. It is one powerful 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”.⁸ To “consent to the presence of God” is precisely what Isaiah means when he speaks of making straight the Lord’s path to our hearts! Beginning on the First Sunday in Lent (February 18) and continuing for 3 Sundays after that, we will be offering in our 9am Adult Forum an *Introduction to Centering Prayer*, led by some of the best licensed trainers in Colorado! I encourage you to attend and take advantage of this wonderful opportunity being offered right here in our own parish!

Advent is about getting ready. What has to happen to you so you will be ready for the revelation, for the coming of the Christ Child? If you stop for a moment to reflect, you will likely become aware of some deadwood that needs to be cleared, some things in your life that need to be let go, to be surrendered. You may

become aware of some twists in the path from God to you which need to be straightened. I encourage you to take the time for stillness, silence, and preparation 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!”⁹ – but **now** is the time to prepare, so that when He comes, the path will already be straight and clear.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 24

² *ibid.*, p. 25

³ *ibid.*, p. 27

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 25-26

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 26

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 26

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 26-27

⁸ for more information on Centering Prayer, see

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer>

⁹ see the Christmas carol, “Joy to the World”