

## Advent 2B 2020 Sermon

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’s the opening line of Mark’s Gospel. Or is it? 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 of Mark is* “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This makes all the *more* sense when we realize that Mark’s Gospel ends NOT with any appearance of Jesus after his resurrection, but rather with the women running away from the empty tomb, frightened.<sup>1</sup> 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 would follow Christ will add their own, ongoing story. **We** are a part of the *continuing* story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; **we** are real-life characters in a Gospel story that has no end.

Now, if the first verse of Mark’s Gospel is really the title of the book, then the *text* of Mark’s Gospel actually begins with verse 2, which is 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...’” (Isa. 40:3)

New Testament scholar John Shea notes that “... path images are [often] developed from the point of view of the traveler. 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.’ ... [*and*] the path is twisted. The point of making straight the path is for someone to smoothly and straightforwardly **arrive**...”<sup>2</sup> 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. That is the task of Advent: to clear the obstacles and straighten the paths for the Advent of Christ, the coming of Christ into our lives.

Our reading continues: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Now, there are three words in that verse that may be obstacles in **our** path toward *understanding* today’s Scripture; so let’s define those words. The word “repentance” means to “change one’s heart, mind, and behaviors;” the word “forgiveness” means “to release or let go of;” and the word “sin,” according to John Shea, means “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.”<sup>3</sup> [repeat]

John the Baptist calls us to change our hearts and minds (our interiors), and our behaviors (our exteriors), by letting go of those thoughts, actions, or dispositions that break the flow of life between God and us, between ourselves and other people, and between ourselves and the earth.

It is no easy task, to be sure. For, if you are at all like me, you have come to **identify** yourself with those very thoughts, actions, or dispositions that break the flow of life between God and you, between yourself and other people, and between yourself and the earth. You and I perversely cling to the very obstacles which **block** Christ’s Advent, **block** the flow of divine life coming into and through our lives at every moment of every day.

If you are like me, you have come to identify with your thoughts and emotions. If we take the time to be still and silent, and look inside ourself, we will notice that all sorts of thoughts are constantly going through our minds. Thoughts about the past, the future; thoughts about other people and our relationships; thoughts stirred up by what we are reading or watching on our TV or smartphone. And we may notice that some of those thoughts immediately elicit strong emotions: anger, hurt, depression, shame, guilt, pride, lust, regret, sorrow, or whatever. And these can quickly take over our consciousness, such that we no longer are *having* those thoughts and emotions; **they** have *us*! We have **become** our thoughts and emotions; we have identified with them. But they are obstacles to the flow of life between God and us, between ourselves and other people, and between ourselves and the earth.

*Other* obstacles in the path arise when we overly identify with what we *do*. We don’t **do** our work, our job, our activities; we **are** our work, our job, our activities. Still *other* obstacles to the flow of life are created when we strongly

hold certain dispositions, attitudes, or mindsets: when we are judgmental, critical, self-righteous, oppositional, cynical, racist, partisan, apathetic, close-minded. **All** of these, and more, become obstacles to the flow of divine life between God and us, between ourselves and other people, and between ourselves and the earth. Obstacles to the coming – the Advent – of Christ into each moment of our lives.

Now, most of us will prepare *outwardly*, in whatever way, for the coming of Christmas: We will string lights outside our houses, put up the Christmas tree, wrap presents, bake Christmas cookies, what have you. And these can be wonderful things, and can be helpful to our *inward* preparation. But unless we submit to the “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” unless we prepare by changing our hearts, minds, and behaviors, and let go of those thoughts, deeds, or dispositions that break the **flow** of *life* between God and the self, as well as between the self, other people and the earth, unless we prepare in **this** way, the path of Christ’s coming remains twisted and full of obstacles.

Dr. Shea tells of a time he was teaching seminarians a course in spirituality. Two priests who were visiting the seminary sat in on the class. Afterwards, one of the priests told Fr. Shea, “‘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 problem was me. I wasn’t ready.’

“This question of readiness,” Dr. Shea continues, “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?...”<sup>4</sup> What has to happen to you and me, so that Christ can come into, and out through, our hearts – not just at Christmas, but each day of the year?

Many people find the regular practice of silence, stillness, and prayer to be vital preparation for receiving the One who comes. *Whatever* method of preparation **you** use, it will necessarily require honestly examining your heart, and courageously removing the obstacles to the flow of divine life between God and you, between yourself and other people, and between yourself and the earth. What is blocking the flow of divine life in and through you?

Your faithful response will not only affect your *own* life; it will affect the inbreaking kingdom of God. For whenever we remove those obstacles to the flow of divine life into and through us, whenever we straighten the path for the Advent of Christ, we add our own chapter to the *continuing* story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For we are real-life characters in a Gospel story that has no end.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Most mainline denominational Bible scholars believe that Mark's original Gospel ended at Mark 16:8. Many additions have been added by copyists in the early Church.

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 26

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27