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Second Sunday of Advent
December 7, 2014
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Ready or Not

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

We have arrived at John the Baptist.

As you know by now, the theme of our Tuesday evening Advent studies this year is "Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited." These Sunday mornings during Advent I am loosely following along the same theme, inviting us to consider together our 2014 Advent journeys through the eyes of some of those who we meet in the Biblical stories that lead us to Christmas day.

Last week we heard from the Hebrew prophets, Isaiah in particular, and we talked about active anticipation - the idea that waiting itself changes us. It is as we confess our sin, risk looking at ourselves, opening ourselves to God, that our conversation with God, our relationship with God, continues and, like the Hebrew people before us, we find hope once more. Waiting that leads to new life involves an opening of ourselves. Where are we waiting in our lives right now? How does our Advent waiting inform our other waiting? How can our times of waiting be times that open us to God?

This morning we move from the Hebrew prophets to John the Baptist. John is best known as the forerunner of Jesus, the one who calls on the people to prepare the way of the Lord. He is mentioned in all four of the gospels. He is the child, now all grown up, who leapt in his mother Elizabeth's womb when Elizabeth welcomed her cousin, the young newly pregnant Mary into her home so many years before. John is the one, chosen even before he was born, to be the messenger who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. John was a prophet. Mark wants his readers to think of the great prophet, Elijah when they see John. His clothing are camel's hair and a leather belt, his diet of

locust and wild honey. He is a rough, wilderness man. John is the human link between all the prophecy that had come before and the new age that the people had been waiting for.

What is it that we see in our lives today when we consider Advent through the eyes of this prophet, John?

This year our suggested scripture readings for this second Sunday of Advent give us John as we meet him through the Gospel of Mark. Mark will be the gospel on which our lectionary focuses this year to come. We are going to hear a lot from Mark.

Mark, you may recall, is widely accepted to be the first gospel written. The author, it seems takes a bold, no nonsense approach to his task. No birth stories here. No genealogy of Jesus. No stories of angels, or shepherd or a baby in a manger.

Mark gets right down to business and we get the purpose of this writing with the opening line, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In the context of the Roman empire, when it was first written and in our context today, Mark wants all hearers to know that a new era is beginning. This is a time and place in which God is entering human history in a new way. The Kingdom of God has dawned. God is ready and willing to enter into our lives, to be our God, and God wants us to believe this and respond with our lives. Just a few verses beyond our reading for this morning, after John has baptized Jesus and he himself has been arrested, Mark writes, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God and saying, ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”¹

For John, and the author Mark, the kingdom of God is very, very near. The time is now to make ourselves ready.

Sometimes in our times of waiting there is urgency that requires action now. This is what I see in John this year. The urgency. The new kingdom is coming. Now is the time to get ready. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!”

This morning Glen read for us the full text of the passage from Isaiah from which Mark quotes as he introduces John and his ministry. It begins:

¹ Mark Allan Powell, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2266.

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people,
 says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
 and cry to her
 that she has served her term,
 that her penalty is paid,
 that she has received from the LORD'S hand
 double for all her sins.³ A voice cries out:
 "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
 and every mountain and hill be made low;
 the uneven ground shall become level,
 and the rough places a plain.

In Isaiah's day the context was probably the end of the exile for the Israelites in Babylon. For John the Baptist, as we know, it was the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

In both cases there is a bold sense that God's coming is imminent, and certain, sure. That God is waiting no longer. God is coming now. Commentator, Mark Powell, professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, OH puts it this way, "God does *not* say, "Tell the people to get ready and when they have done so, I will come to them." God says, "Prepare the way! I am coming to my people (whether they are ready or not)."

Powell continues, "The voice of God in the Isaiah text has the character of a wounded lover. God is desperate: "I will come to my people, and nothing will keep me from them. Mountains will be torn down, valleys will be filled in, rough places made smooth -- whatever it takes!" Diana Ross and her song, "Ain't no mountain high enough" come to mind."² "Ain't no mountain high enough to keep me from you.....

Mark's John conveys much this same sense. In Mark's version of the story we do not hear John speak some of the harsh words in the other gospel writers' versions of John. Rather the verses in Mark simply say that John appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people came and were baptized. They sensed the urgency and responded. God is coming to us!

² *ibid.*

It is indeed good news. What can we do to get ready? Recognize our sin. Confess our sin. Repent. Turn. Change. Make ourselves ready to to hear and see and *follow* God with us in the person of Jesus Christ.

This week I read an illustration of this idea that stuck with me. The author wrote,

“We are probably all familiar with the game we played as children, "Hide-and-Seek". Remember that? Everyone hides and tries not to get caught, but eventually, when the game goes as it should, everyone gets found. The game is interesting when we stop and think about it because "hiding" is not really very much fun. If you ask most children, "Do you want to sit somewhere all by yourself and keep very quiet for a long time?" you will not get many takers. What's *fun* about "Hide-and-Seek" is not the hiding, but the getting found. Everybody likes to be found. When Advent comes around every year, we are reminded that God is coming to find us. It is certain. It is sure. We of course have our ways of hiding. But when John the Baptist shouts, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" it is as though God has just called, "Ready or not, here I come!"³

No more hiding. No more excuses. Now is the time. To come out into the light. As scary as that can be sometime, to give up old ways, to turn around, to repent, to change. Now is the time. We can't really get to Christmas without going through John the Baptist. He holds us accountable, keeps us honest. We know what he says is true.

How will we prepare this year for God's coming?

³ *ibid.*