

“Preparing for Good News”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Second Sunday of Advent – December 10, 2017

Mark 1: 1-8

Imagine it is 70 A.D. You live in Galilee and there is unrest in the region. Some Jews have rebelled against the Roman authorities, and Jerusalem is under attack. The emperor has died and there are four men claiming the throne of Rome. Chaos is all around you, prices for goods are escalating, and families and villages are torn apart by ethnic strife between Jews and Gentiles. As you ponder what the future holds and what you are being led to do, you hear of this small sect of Jews which calls themselves “Christians.” When you inquire about them and what they believe, you are handed a scroll which begins, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

This is the historical context in which Mark’s Gospel was written. It was a chaotic time in the Middle East, and there was much uncertainty about what would happen in both the immediate and long-term future. In the midst of this incredible anxiety and stress, Mark starts his story by stating: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And yet, Mark’s beginning is not with Jesus Christ himself, or even with the main character of our text today, John the Baptist. In fact, Mark begins with the story of Israel.

You see, after Mark announces the title of his gospel, he directly quotes the Old Testament prophets of Isaiah and Malachi. He wants his audience to be clear that this story is not something new and exciting which has sprung up all at once. This is a story which has been going on for some time, which has been awaiting its culmination for generations, and now, that time has arrived. The prophet Isaiah sets the stage for this story: “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.” And Malachi continues: “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Lillian Daniel writes: *Most of us want to get the credit. We want to be known as the one who got the job done.*

Business leaders do not make it onto the front page of the newspaper for saying, “Well, it wasn’t all about me. You see, there was a messenger who came before me, and in fact prepared the way.” No, that would never fly.

No politician would ever stop to thank the person she replaced from her rival party. Newly elected senators and representatives seldom acknowledge the work that happened before they arrived on Capitol Hill. Rather, they behave as though their appearance on the scene marks the beginning of time itself.

Our culture loves everything new and easily forgets our debts to history. So, our leaders portray themselves as masters of the turnaround. To hear

today's stories of leadership, you would think nothing good happened until they got there to turn around the general incompetence of the organization. Often such leaders are called "saviors."

So, it is interesting that when it comes to Jesus, the real savior, modesty makes an appearance. The Bible makes it clear that before he arrived on the scene, even Jesus had some help with the prep work.

The Gospel of Mark starts the Jesus story by looking back to Isaiah, who said, "See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare you way . . ." Even the Lord needs people to prepare the way . . .

The Second Sunday of Advent is a time for all of us . . . to remember the humility that comes with honoring our antecedents. If Jesus can admit it, so can we. We all have ancestors in our callings, people who prepared the way (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 44-46*).

And so, in the midst of this chaotic time, with the clear reminder that this story has begun hundreds of years earlier with God's chosen people, Mark calls his audience out into the wilderness. People are drawn from the cities, from the marketplaces, from the monotony of their daily lives – they are drawn away from those things and places; and are drawn to something and someone different. They are drawn to a man clothed in camel's hair, a man who ate locusts and wild honey, a man who looked nothing like someone who crowds would be drawn towards. But they came. And came. And came.

And when they came, they heard something unlike anything they had ever heard before: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. "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 people were drawn to this man who told them they had to repent, turn away from the sins of their past, and look forward to another who was to come. It seems pretty incredible to me that "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to (John)," all so they could be told: "Repent, confess your sins, for God is sending someone greater than me."

This is also part of "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The beginning of this good news is John the Baptist telling us: "Repent, confess, and be prepared for the one God sends." Repentance, confession, seeking forgiveness for the sins we have committed – that is what drew the crowds, that is what led people to wonder, that is how Mark begins his story to a church and a world full of chaos and anxiety.

Lillian Daniel continues: *John, as a servant, has no leadership technique – just the call to tell the truth. That is a messy truth that God has stuck to his heart like the wild honey he eats. He cannot fling it aside; he wears it like a freak who does not fit in with the powers around him.*

Thank God for freaks like that. Thanks God for freaks who refuse to buy the publicity the world throws their way and trust instead in God's proclamation. Had John not prepared the way, and then admitted it, Advent would be a season not of waiting but of mistakenly believing it has all been

accomplished by the latest guru. And that would have been a short season, I suspect, not one we would remember two thousand years later. For charismatic godly figures come and go. In fact, preparers of the way are still around. We may be preparers ourselves.

But there is only one savior of the world. And in Advent, we are still waiting.

Waiting for the savior is humbling. It forces us to admit that the world does not operate on our schedule. And by waiting for the savior, we have to admit the obvious: that he is not here yet. If he is not here yet, that pretty much rules out the possibility that the savior is one of us. It guarantees that it is not me (ibid, 46-48).

Are we willing in the Season of Advent to be drawn away from the cities and marketplaces, and be drawn out into the countryside to sit and hear John preach? Are we willing to leave behind for a brief time the lists of preparations, the scores of holiday activities, the crush of man-made pressures, so we might hear the voice of the one in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord?" Are we willing to repent of our self-centeredness, confess our sins of inattention to God, and seek forgiveness for our broken relationships with our neighbor and our Lord? Are we willing to take an Advent journey to the countryside, and wait - truly wait - for the advent of our Savior, God's Son?

Too often, I think, we tend to think that we just need to make a slight adjustment to our lives, and we will then be all good with God. Many times, that means we are trying to hold on to too much control of our lives, failing to see our own need for a savior, and mistakenly thinking we can be a savior for others. Perhaps this Advent Season is an opportunity for us to let go of our control, and give ourselves over completely to our God.

Are we giving ourselves over completely to the one who is coming when we look inwardly, cause people to feel like outsiders, and fail to welcome others as Christ has welcomed us? Are we giving ourselves over completely to the one who is coming when we think we can comfort ourselves, and not allow others to ease our burden and our pain? Are we giving ourselves over completely to the one who is coming when we fail to believe, in the midst of all this chaos and anxiety, that there truly is good news to be shared - and that we might be the ones who are called to share it?

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That is how Mark begins his story. It is a story which began with the people of Israel. It is a story which began with John the Baptist proclaiming repentance in the wilderness. It is a story which began with Jesus Christ being God's Incarnate Word. It is a story which continues - with each of us today. May we each know God's presence and peace as we continue to wait for our Savior's arrival.

Thanks be to God. Amen.