

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Advent 2, 12/6/2020, Mark 1:1-8, Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

We kicked off the first Sunday of Advent last week with a reading that comes later in the Gospel of Mark, because the first Sunday of Advent always begins with apocalypse and chaos. Then the second and third Sundays in Advent feature John the Baptist, or JBap as his friends call him. Today we hear about JBap in the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark.

Mark is going to be our Wednesday Bible study topic in the season of Epiphany, as well as the Gospel we focus on this year church, all the way through the season after Pentecost. Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. Mark gets straight to the point in his writing, sometimes coming across as abrupt. In today's beginning, Mark skips over Jesus' birth and goes right to the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

This is of course the ultimate Advent message. We are preparing in this season: preparing for the gift of Jesus. And John the Baptist's message is firmly rooted in the passage from Isaiah that we also heard today. "A voice cries out: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

These verses from Isaiah begin what's commonly called "Second Isaiah." In second Isaiah, destruction has happened, and the prophet focuses on the promise of what's to come. That's why we start with comfort, o comfort ye my people.

Don't we need that comfort today? We come to or tune in to church seeking comfort, but instead we have a locust-popping oddly dressed prophet preaching repentance.

When I was in Sunday School, I learned that to repent meant to be very VERY sorry. Sorry on steroids. As an adult, I realized that repenting wasn't just feeling super sorry but literally changing direction. Stopping that destructive sin and moving in another way. And John takes this further, asking us to make the paths for the Lord straight.

What do you need to straighten out in your life right now? This has been a miserable year for most of us. I think in years to come we will hear a lot about What We Learned During the Pandemic of 2020. People will derive meaning, or at least we will try to. But right now, we're still living it. Right now cases are climbing, and we don't know if church will be open next Sunday or for Christmas Eve. Right now, in some parts of the country, people wonder not about church on Christmas eve but whether there will be sufficient hospital beds on Christmas eve.

Things are a mess. Things were a mess in the time Isaiah was writing, too, long before Christ. Things were a mess when John was baptizing in the wilderness. When Jesus was born, there was a star and angels appeared to shepherds, but the impact of the Incarnation, God becoming flesh, wasn't felt by many until Jesus grew up and began his public ministry, right after being baptized by John.

For John, the world was a mess. The world hadn't changed just because our savior had been born. John was called to prepare the way for the adult Jesus. John was called to prepare for

something that he wasn't really able to participate in. Because life didn't end well for our friend JBap. He ended up with his head on a platter.

How do we look at John the Baptist, clad in camel's hair and leather, knowing his grim future: how do we look at him and see hope?

People ask me why I love John the Baptist, and "because I look at him and see hope" is never my answer. I love John the Baptist for being outrageous. As a parish priest, I'm not an outrageous person. I put a lot of care into how I craft sentences in sermons. Sometimes I take things out when I think they are too revealing of my personal or political opinions, for example.

John the Baptist, on the other hand, was not someone careful in his speech. He did not back down from volatile issues or even from calling people names. That's part of how he ended up in jail and lost his head, so I am probably not going to ever model myself after JBap: but I admire him. I admire his authenticity, his refusal to back down from what he knew to be the truth.

I'm pretty moderate. I'm pretty sure John the Baptist would have no use for my moderate self. He was extreme. An extremist.

An extremist for Jesus. *That's* how we look at John the Baptist and see hope. We couldn't see hope if we just looked at the bug-eating baptizer who is headed for imprisonment and execution. John points elsewhere. John humbles himself, says he's not worthy of the Jesus to whom he points.

Jesus, who is also headed for imprisonment and execution. Yet we look at Jesus and we do see hope. In this time of year, we look for him as a baby, and I don't know what offers the kind of hope new babies do. I've had the privilege of holding babies minutes after their birth, including a many in our congregation. I've been blessed to watch some of those babies grow. Sometimes I hold them when they are born and then again just a few weeks or months later to baptize them. These are the most hopeful moments for me in ministry.

But Advent isn't only about Jesus coming as a baby, and the second Sunday of Advent isn't only about John the Baptist. Advent also looks to the second coming of Christ. That might sound pretty far out there to the average Episcopalian. We aren't ones to mull over the so-called Rapture or other fringe theologies, but the second coming is something we explicitly find not only in our Bible but in our prayers. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." We pray that over and over. What does it mean to you?

What does "Christ will come again" mean to you this time of year, when there's so much darkness? What does it mean to you in a time of darkness for the world, when people are sick or dying and unable to work and businesses and churches have to close; when Christians gather but have to wear masks and not touch each other and not sing?

What does Jesus coming again in all that mean to you?

I wonder what we will read in those What We Learned During the Pandemic of 2020 articles in the history books. I wonder if times like these will teach us to put Christ at the true center of our lives. I wonder if the darkness will give new meaning to wanting God to tear open the heavens

and come down. I wonder if all the unrest of the past year will help righteousness and peace to kiss each other, as we heard in today's psalm.

What do you want when Christ comes again? How are you preparing?