

**Advent 2  
December 10, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

This morning's sermon is about "Good News;" it is about "wilderness;" and it is about Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus ... and you and me.

This is the Second Sunday of our Advent Season. Every year on this Sunday we hear the story of John the Baptist from one of the gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke. And, in each instance, we hear a quote from the prophet Isaiah. This year we hear Mark's version of the story which comes as the introduction to Mark's gospel. It opens with: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The author of Mark's gospel then goes immediately to a quote from 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,'"*

The "beginning of the good news..." What might have been "good news" for the people in Jesus' time? What might have been the "good news" that people were longing for when journeying to see John the Baptist in the wilderness? What might have been "good news" for the people in Isaiah's time some 600 years before Jesus? And what might be the "good news" today for people like you and me? The word "gospel" means "good news." "Good news" instead of what? And how is this story of Jesus ... his birth, his life, his ministry, his teachings, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection ... how might this story be "good news?"

Do you remember what happened to the people of the tribe of Israel in the time of Isaiah? They had been attacked and forcibly removed from their homes by the Assyrians. Their temple had been destroyed. They were exiled to Babylon, a foreign land. The people of Israel were now living in a wilderness ... certainly a wilderness to them. I imagine that "good news" to them would have been that they could return to their homeland. I imagine that "good news" to them would have been that the God who had been with them in Israel was still with them in Babylon ... even after the Temple had been destroyed. I imagine that the "good news" to those who were exiled in Babylon was that they would be restored to God's loving presence. I imagine that "good news" back then might be the same "good news" that we are looking for today. Listen to another quote from Isaiah, this time from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter:

*"Ah, you who make evil decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!"*

The words of Isaiah could be applied to the tax bill just passed by the United States Congress.

And what about the "good news" in the time of John the Baptist? People were journeying into the wilderness to hear him "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Why would that have been "good news?" They could have gone to the Temple in Jerusalem and had the priests make a sacrifice on their behalf for the forgiveness of their sins. But this was the Second Temple, rebuilt by King Herod in the years before the birth of Jesus, paid for by the heavy taxes upon the Jews, and presided over by a family of high priests appointed by Herod.

So, why might people journey into the wilderness to find John the Baptist rather than go to the Temple in Jerusalem? Perhaps it was the "good news" that instead of what they saw as a superficial and hypocritical holiness of a sacrifice at the Temple, they sought a true experience of the sacred in an un-brokered relationship with their God. Maybe the "good news" for these people was that God could be found in the wilderness, in the spiritual washing in the Jordan River, and that their life of repentance and integrity would mean that they lived in the realm of God's love and forgiveness.

During this Advent season we sing the Song of Mary as our Hymn of Praise at the beginning of our liturgy. This is a paraphrase of what is called the Magnificat from the early chapters of Luke's gospel. It echoes the theme from Isaiah 10 and is certainly an example of the longing of the people at the time of John the Baptist:

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

To the poor and "lowly" ... for those hungry, and thirsty, and without shelter ... this would have been "good news."

And what might have been "good news" for the people that walked beside Jesus, who ate at his table, and who listened to his teachings? Could it be that Jesus taught an unconventional wisdom? After living under the economic and political oppression of the Roman Empire, could it be that an alternative empire under God's rule was really "good news?" For a Jew who lived at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and was often separated from the rest of the community by the pious religious purity laws, I imagine that being accepted by Jesus, in the name of God, would certainly have been "good news." To be included and affirmed as someone who was worthy of God's love and forgiveness, regardless of how marginalized one was from the rest of society would have been "good news." To know that the poor, and the meek, and the hungry, and the grieving were all blessed by God would have been "good news."

These words are about “good news;” they are about Isaiah, John the Baptist, and about Jesus; and they are also about a place called “wilderness.” It is interesting to note that the “good news” is proclaimed, in of all places, the wilderness. In the time of Isaiah the “good news” was proclaimed to those in exile in the wilderness of Babylon. In the time of John the Baptist the “good news” was proclaimed in the wilderness of the Jordan. And Jesus taught his “good news” on the hillsides and seashore of the Galilean countryside which was, no doubt, a “wilderness” to the Roman occupiers of Israel. So, what is it about a wilderness, literally or metaphorically, that welcomes a proclamation of “good news?” And what is “wilderness” for you and for me today?

It seems to me that what was “good news” to the people of the tribe of Israel in the time of Isaiah, and what was “good news” to the people of the time of John the Baptist, is also “good news” to us today. People around the world, and even in our backyard, are marginalized by economic and political oppression from our society into a wilderness of poverty. The homeless in our streets sleep in a wilderness every night. Even those of us who live with the security of a roof over our heads, and food on our table, and a family to come home to every night still have our own wildernesses that appear all too suddenly. Maybe it is an unexpected illness; the threat of losing a job; discord in a relationship with a family member; mounting debt; or an addiction ... our wildernesses today can take many forms for people like you and me.

Most of us try to stay away from those wilderness places. Yet that is exactly where the cry can be heard ... it is in the wilderness that the “good news” is most often proclaimed and listened to. So what might happen to us if we were to break through the denial in our lives that avoids the recognition of the wilderness we may be living in? What might we gain by entering the wilderness with our eyes and ears open? What would we lose? What is the good news that you might be longing for that could only be encountered in one of those wilderness places in your life?

On this Second Sunday of Advent we are waiting in hope and anticipation for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. This is the Incarnation ... God coming alive in the world in which we live. This is Good News. Mark’s gospel does not begin with a story of Jesus’ birth. Rather it begins with a call to be prepared. If we are to know the reality of the Incarnation; that is, if we are to know what it really means for God to come alive in this world, then we have to be able to hear this “good news.” Part of our preparation is to leave the comfortable and secure places in our lives and choose to enter our own wilderness with our eyes and ears ... and our hearts and souls ... ready to hear the good news that God loves each and every one of us. In those untamed places in our psyche that we know as a wilderness we have to be open to living into God’s forgiveness as an ever-present reality so that God can come alive in us. In those dark and forbidding places in our soul where we feel unworthy of anyone’s love, including our own, we can encounter the proclamation of God’s love that transcends all boundaries, even those we place around our wilderness.

In just a few weeks we will celebrate the birth of the Christ child. We can either acknowledge it as just one more Christmas, one more celebration of the birthday of Jesus, or we can live into

the reality it represents. We all live in a wilderness of one kind or another, and it is there that we can encounter the “good news” ... the Good News of God alive in Jesus ... and the Good News that God can come alive in each of us as well. It is in that longing for the “good news” in our wilderness that we live throughout this Advent season. And it is in that hope and anticipation of the coming of God in Jesus that we prepare our lives for something more than just another holiday.

Amen.