

“Prepare the Way”
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13;
Isaiah 40:1-5; Mark 1:1-8

December 6, 2020, Advent II
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Today we come to the Second Sunday in Advent. Last week we talked about a passage further on in Mark, at a point where it felt like the world was falling apart. It's interesting that the church year, as it has been developed over time, starts with that feeling of need, of wondering what's happening, what's going on in my own life, reminding us of those times when we struggle and wonder at what's happening and how we might again have a change in our lives. It does bring up the promise and begin to have a ray of light come into our world.

The Second Sunday of Advent builds on that as it goes back to the beginning of Mark. Mark invites us to hear the good news of Christ Jesus, the Son of God. It is the beginning that goes on through Advent as we think about what it is that God is about.

Even in his beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Mark doesn't start with Jesus on the scene. He starts with this story about John, inviting us to listen to the prophets, to listen and see what we might expect to notice and to hear. We get this story of one crying in the wilderness.

I looked at what the Greek word for “crying” meant. It's not about a prophet out in the wilderness sobbing, but rather it's about “shouting with intense feeling.” That also made me think about how the wilderness of the internet feels today - there's so much of that shouting with great feeling in an attempt to get our attention. I don't suppose we have so many people wandering out of the actual wilderness shouting with great feeling today.

But even then, as John comes out of the wilderness, getting attention wasn't enough. Isaiah suggests that he will be talking about something in particular. It's not just anything. It's not the news of the day. But he is inviting those who hear him, particularly those of his day, to come and prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths. He has a particular message he is bringing: the idea of preparing the way and making straight the paths.

As we think about the preparing that he is inviting, as we listen and hear that invitation, it makes me think of those maidens who were keeping their lamps trimmed and had the oil they needed to go the distance. It also reminds me of how often it feels like God doesn't just show up and say, “I'm going to do this,” but he invites us into a process, invites us to engage with God and with what's

going on. We have a part to play. It's always a little surprising to me how much of a part to play God seems to invite us to have. In this case it's preparing the way.

We are familiar with needing to prepare. I don't know if you can tell or not, but I have a slight black eye this morning because I did something I wasn't really all that prepared to do. It would have been better if I had called a plumber who was much more prepared to deal with that plumbing job. So instead, I had a fight with my plumbing and managed to give myself a black eye. We realize that there are ways of being prepared. We are used to that. Plumbers are prepared to do their job. Electricians, car mechanics. People go to school to prepare for the world we are in today.

God is inviting us to prepare. What kind of preparation is God inviting us to do? What's the preparation? Here we have John inviting the people to come and have a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That seems to be the idea of what the preparation is – to come and take the symbolic dip in the water, the idea of being washed clean as we admit our own sin, our own failures, what's going on in our own lives so that we can turn. That's the idea of repentance, *metanoia*. It is to turn, turn around, turn toward God.

So, we have to think about what it is that we are repenting of. Sin is that big word we think about. I read some Parker Palmer this week, and he suggested so much of what we do is out of fear. We have a fear that drives us to do particular things. We live with a certain fear of the pandemic, a fear of this disease or a fear of what it might cause. A fear of how it affects our economy or the fear of how it might affect our bodies, or the fear of losing someone in the course of this pandemic. So we can simply live in that fear, or we can try to do the things that mitigate it. We wear masks for that reason. We do other things, like distancing, to mitigate that. We can simply live in fear, or we can begin to think about what we also have at the same time. We can live in the fear of not living up to somebody's opinion of us. We can live in fear that we won't achieve the success we are supposed to achieve. We can live in fear of all kinds of things in our lives, but as we live in fear we truncate our lives.

This invitation to create a path, to remove the barriers, to make the way straight seems to me in part to remove the fear, to turn from the fear to the hope that God brings, the hope of the light that shines through God's gift. To begin to see that light. To turn toward God. To let go of the fear in our own lives. I don't know that we can ever not have that fear, but perhaps we can also recognize there are other ways we can live. Particularly in this season, I think we are given the promise of hope. We are invited to go beyond the fear and live into the hope that God gives us, the grace that God shows us.

As John begins, he talks about the good news of Jesus Christ because it is that invitation to recognize that we don't have to live in fear. We have the promises of God, the grace of God, the hope God gives us, the light God shines into our lives so that we don't have to live continually in fear. We have hope. We recognize we have love. There is grace. There is faith. There are ways of living that don't depend on that fear. We can let go of the fear.

We are invited to participate in what God is doing by turning to God, turning and allowing that light to shine. To recognize that by grace, God brings us together. By hearing the invitation and coming. One of the things we can do is come to the table and remember that we have a God who sustains us. We can trust that there is sustenance for us. We can trust that there is grace for us. We can trust that God is with us and will lead us. We come and are made into a family, into a community that eats together, that takes care of one another. Particularly in these times when there are real needs, we recognize that God has given us the gift of participating in that way of sustaining each other.

So as we come this morning, we come in thanksgiving for a God we can trust, a God who gives us hope, a God who shows us the way, a God who feeds us and delivers us. As we go through these next weeks, we are invited to continually turn to the light, turn to where the hope is in our lives, to recognize that it's not all fear, that God has given us grace and there is beauty, there is relationship, there is real life. Beyond the fear, we can open our lives to God and go from fear to hope, preparing the way for God to come straight into our hearts. Amen.