

SERMON December 6, 2020 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

I quite love the gospel of Mark.

And our scripture for today – the first 8 verses of Mark, are a great example of why I love Mark. In his gospel, Mark gets right to the point. While Matthew begins with a genealogy, and Luke a rich birth story, and John with such eloquence words and theology – Mark just gets right to it.

“the beginning of the Good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”

Right away – we know who this is about - Jesus Christ.

And he tells us Jesus Christ is the son of God. No evidence to support it, no building up to it – just a fact. Jesus Christ is the son of God. And this is good news. Then he points back to the old scriptures to Isaiah and then forward to John. And right away we know who John is, what he does, and what his purpose is: to prepare the way of Jesus Christ. Mark even stretches past Jesus, pointing to importance of the Holy Spirit within us. All in 8 verses. And it's written with such haste, such urgency. In fact, in the whole gospel of Mark the word immediately is used over and over. Why this immediacy, why this urgency?

Scholars think that the Gospel of Mark was written either during, or soon after, the first Jewish war with Rome, which began in 66CE and reached its climax in the destruction of the temple in 70CE. It was a time where Jesus' earliest followers struggled to survive. Some radical Jews have revolted against Rome, others urged submission to Rome as the best path towards peace. Jerusalem was under siege The emperor Nero died and there was unrest even in Rome as 4 men became emperor, only to be assassinated. And then the very General besieging Jerusalem became emperor. The world was in turmoil.

Can you imagine what it would have been like – to be an early follower of Jesus during this time – when Christianity was so new you were just seen as Jewish heretics, to live in a world in turmoil, in a city under siege, to hear mark's gospel:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ son of God. They needed good news.

But then after stating that Jesus Christ is the good news with such haste and urgency, almost like someone ran miles just to tell you something and then when they finally get there, they're grasping for breath to speak, why in such urgency, does Mark even mention John the Baptist? He isn't mentioned in Mark's gospel much besides here. Why waste precious space for him when people so desperately needed to hear the good news?

Mark describes John the Baptist in such a way that he echoes the old testament prophet Elijah. The way he dresses – in camels hair, the way he eats wild locusts and honey – this is no ordinary diet for those in Jerusalem at the time. Mark describes him

as a preacher and a baptizer – it's possible that this particular type of baptizing originated with John the Baptist.

He's so captivating that people travel for miles outside of Jerusalem into the wilderness to be baptized by him. They go seek him – this weird guy in the woods preaching repentance and eating locust and honey.

And what does John tell them? He says it's not about him, he's humble – he says it's really about the one who is coming. John uses the power, this platform he's cultivated and the audience he's gathered, and points them onward. He tells them that Jesus is coming, so prepare.

In a sense, the beginning of Mark's gospel is with John himself, this larger-than-life character who, at every turn, wants his listeners to know that he is only a transitional figure. So, if we listen to John, 'the beginning' is not with him, or with the prophets before him, but with Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark points us back to John to point us forward to Christ. John prepares the way for Christ and tells us to prepare.

Nothing that we achieve in this world, we do so without those who have prepared the way for us.

The privileges, the rights we have today, we have them because of someone else prepared the way. We live them because of motions they started.

I know you know who Rosa Parks is. But do you know who Sarah Evans is or Claudette Colvin. Evans refused to give up her seat on the bus in 1952, Colvin the same in 1955. In honoring their significance, homiletics professor Courtney Buggs writes, "Before there was a Rosa Parks, the Civil Rights icon attributed with prompting the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, there was Sarah Evans and Claudette Colvin. These trailblazing young women set in motion that which would be later attributed to Parks. Their names are scarcely, if at all, associated with the Civil Rights Movement, yet their actions precipitated one of the most pivotal events of the time. Evans preceded Colvin who preceded Parks. Just as John preceded Jesus."

Preparation is necessary for the peace of Christ. It is holy work. And so we must honor those that have paved our way. Those like John the Baptist, who used their power to point forward, often un-thanked and overlooked, but essential nonetheless

Preparation is not easy. As John the Baptist tell us, preparation requires repentance. It requires humility to know the ways in which we have sinned.

As Martin Copenhaver writes, "repentance and confession both require a searching and honest look back. There are no shortcuts. John the Baptist, the one who insists on keeping the focus on the future and the one who is to come, also hearkens back to the past in his call for repentance...The retro clothing and the prophet it recalls are

themselves reminder that any movement forward first will require a retrospective look back, both to our own personal histories and to the salvation history of God's people."

We who look to God to deliver us from our enemies must first examine ourselves to see whether we are fit to stand before a righteous God.

But it is not bad either. John drew in people from all around to come and repent. They would not have come, if repentance was the end. No – repentance brings about renewal, resurrection, new life with Christ.

On this second Sunday of advent, where we celebrate peace, rejoice that preparation paves the way for Christ's peace. We honor the Sarah Evans and Claudette Colvins of the world, who paved the way to where we are now.

Preparation opens us to take part in this season of Advent. As we wait for Christ: we prepare. We are the followers of John the Baptist, who took the journey into the wilderness to hear of the one that is to come. So prepare, repent, and look forward with the joy that is to come: Jesus Christ our savior.

When I write sermons, I always start by recording myself reading the scripture. I then close my eyes and just listen to the scripture over and over again. And when I listened to this scripture, to Mark's urgent first words, I found myself hearing the first song of the musical "Godspell".

Godspell is a musical from the 70s that is based off of Jesus's parables and the opening song in Godspell is called "Prepare ye, the way of the lord". And that's the only lyric. The song is just "prepare ye the way of the lord," over and over again. Just some crazy guy singing "prepare ye the way of lord"

Its weird and strange but also joyous and urgent and it makes you see how some weird guy who wears camel's hair and ate locusts could convince you to travel to the wilderness just to hear him. It feels complete in and of itself – just the call to prepare.

Preparation is usually just seen as the work before something begins, but here it is – the beginning itself.

Thank God we get to prepare. And thank God Christ does the rest. Thanks be to God. Amen.