

Advent II (RCL/B): "Up for Holy Change, Anyone?"  
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8  
December 9-10, 2023  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Today's Gospel starts with chapter 1, verse 1, of Mark's Gospel. (We'll be hearing a lot from him in this 2<sup>nd</sup> of our 3 year lectionary.) Does anything strike you as odd about his opening? What's missing??

Mark doesn't start with stories related to Jesus' birth, like Matthew and Luke. Mark doesn't start in that mystical time-before-time-began, like John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* (John 1:1) Mark starts in the wilderness with John the Baptist "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" (Mark 1:4) Baby Jesus makes no appearance anywhere in Mark's Gospel, and grown-up Jesus is nowhere in sight in this first scene. But John knows the Messiah is somewhere on the not-too-distant horizon, and He tells his listeners:

*7... "The 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. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

John the Baptizer's message is, "He's coming, so get ready!" We've been talking about how we prepare the way of the Lord by drawing close to Him in Word and Sacrament, by being present and active in the Body of Christ, by serving Him in the last, the lost, and the least. John the Baptist reminds us that we are also to prepare by **opening ourselves up to holy change.**

Sometimes when I say, "God isn't finished with me yet," I'm actually asking people to be patient with my shortcomings and forgiving of my failures. In other words, "Go easy on me, please!" But the confession "God isn't finished with me yet" should also remind me that

the Holy Spirit has Her work cut out for Her remaking me into a more faithful image of Christ. I need my rough edges knocked off, I need my grime scoured clean, I need to be constantly reoriented **away** from what **I** want and **toward** what **God** wants. ‘Sounds like a Lenten message of repentance, right? That’s no coincidence. Advent is a penitential season in the church year. It’s why we won’t be singing the Gloria, the hymn of praise, again until Christmas Eve.

When I was a little Roman Catholic kid I went to Confession and reported how many times I had committed my little grammar-school-sized sins. It’s easier to catalog as a child how many times we were fast-and -loose with the truth when questioned by our parents or teachers, Scout leaders or coaches, than as an adult to examine why it is that certain people get under our skin and we’re less than charitable toward them, or why we continue to **persist** in behavior we know is wrong, unhealthy, destructive to others or ourselves, or why we **resist** beginning to do things that would strengthen our relationships, heal our bodies, nourish our souls, bless our community, honor creation and its Creator.

Advent is the Lord’s invitation to ask ourselves not just, “What should I get my family for Christmas?” but also, “What stands between me and holiness?” It might or might not be starkly identifying something glaring like, “I’m cheating on my spouse,” “I’m embezzling from my employer,” “I’m gambling or snorting away my kids’ college fund.” It could be something I try to justify by saying to myself, “I’m busy! I have a lot of other responsibilities!” but in the cold, clear light the Holy Spirit sometimes sheds, I have to admit, “I’m not helping my siblings care for our aging parent.” “I make time for my pastimes, but I don’t make time to get myself to worship or to take the kids to Sunday

School.” “I find time for activities that will advance my career, but can’t seem to find time to help others when there’s nothing in it for me.”

Wilderness in Scripture represents more than one thing. It can be the place where we wander for 40 years because we’re just not following the directions the Lord has provided, ignoring heavenly GPS. It can be the place of desolation, where we sit in the aftermath of destruction our sins have brought upon us. It can be the moment when the scales fall from our eyes and we realize we have failed and are powerless to help ourselves. On Friday my devotional calendar asked this question and offered this wisdom:

“So where do you go when you can’t fix your life? The only place to go is back to the One who made you.”<sup>1</sup>

I am powerless but God is powerful. I am sinful but God is forgiving. One of the most powerful prayers in the world is, “I can’t do this. But You can.” God doesn’t require the impossible of us. God **made** us; God knows what we **are** and **are not** capable of. In St. Luke’s telling of the Annunciation, Mary asks how a virgin can have a baby, and Gabriel answers, “...*nothing will be impossible with God.*” (Luke 1:37) God intends for us to be holy. Every one of us can **be** holy. To be holy is to be set apart for God’s purposes. In Holy Baptism we **are** set apart for God’s purposes; it’s our baptism with water **and** with the Holy Spirit. In *The Lion King* the spirit of Mufasa issues from a cloud a statement that’s also a judgment: “Simba, you are more than you have become.” Are **we** more than we have become? Advent is a really good time to ask, “Am I living up to God’s hopes and plans for me? If not: **what stands between me and holiness?**” If it looks like Mt. Everest stands between me and holiness, then is the time to pray, “**I can’t do this. But You can.**”

“So where do you go when you can’t fix your life? The only place to go is back to the One who made you.”

The Scripture that accompanies that quote is James 1:5-6, from *The Message*:

*Pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get His help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believing, without a second thought.*

The wilderness can be the place where the noise of the world and the commands to consume recede and we're better able to hear the still, small voice of God. It can be the place where the light pollution and dazzling glitter of the secular holiday are replaced by a night sky with a single star prophesying the birth of a King and beckoning us to worship. It's a paradox: worshiping with a clean heart is a beautiful thing but isn't required, because worship helps to cleanse our heart. We don't wait to worship till we're **good enough**. (When will **that** be??) We worship so the Holy Spirit can make us **better**. It may sound weird, but it's true. When we turn our eyes to God we're able to see ourselves more clearly. "It ain't always a pretty sight." But until the symptoms are felt and the sickness is diagnosed, the cure can't happen. This is a place and a time when we accept the **bad** news that we're sinners and we embrace the **good** news that we have a Savior. But we're not complacent in our failures in love. We boldly **ask**, "What stands between me and holiness?" and we **listen** when the Holy Spirit gives us an answer. Then if it looks like Mt. Everest stands between me and holiness, we pray, "I can't do this. But You can." Amen.

<sup>1365</sup> *Inspirational Thoughts For Women By Women*: Dec. 8 quote by Sheila Walsh, (Shutterstock).

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham