

## **Preparing the Way, Making Paths Straight**

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**Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8**

Who is this man? Where has he come? Why does he appear so abruptly standing on the shoreline waiting for his queue for a baptism of repentance? Before we fill in the blanks with other gospel texts, we look at this early story of Jesus with wonder. It is a story steeped in the words of Israel's great prophet, Isaiah. The prophecy is however not about Jesus, but about the man of the wilderness, the one who inhabits the scrub and thistle of the hard living existence of the backlands. In post-modern parlance, this would be the fly-over lands, places where shrubs and bugs are a greater population than humans. As my second cousin would have said, "I live somewhere, way out in the sticks."

We know little of John the Baptizer here, except what we are told by the prophet. He is a messenger, crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way, and making paths straight. This Sunday, we are on a spiritual path which winds and leaves us wondering what mischief lingers right around the next bend? We want answers to our deepest spiritual longings. Roadmaps to our fates. Yet, there is no Greek chorus here, only one who is burnt in the Middle Eastern sun, pointing a direction, reminding us that we can find a straight road in this life.

So, what is this nomad saying to us?

### **Baptism of Repentance**

Well, we know what John is doing in the desert, besides preparation for the coming messiah. John is preparing us in a very particular way. There is a pre-requisite understanding of what it will take to become followers of the one whom we will claim to be disciples. This is a baptism.

Baptism is a ritual cleansing that is much older than our current understanding of standing at a font and sprinkling a crying baby with water. We are reminded of the King who was told to dunk in water for his leprosy. Early church baptismal fonts had iconography of Noah's ark and Leviticus. Cleansing was a ritual that was preformed to make sure that someone who wanted to sacrifice before the Lord was clean.

It is also important to understand that Mark wants a revolution of sorts by throwing aside permanently unclean castes in John's time. People who seemed unfit were being cleansed and told that they were clean. This is always a scandal to those who wish to believe God shows partiality.

We will see this in the people whom Jesus will heal. Ten lepers, the woman with an issuance of blood, the man born blind or a demon possessed man in a cemetery are people we know surrounded the rabbi, Jesus. Much like today, Mark observes people being culturally ascribed sinfulness and told that they could not achieve salvation because of poverty, sickness or gender. Mark knows this is not good news, this will not lead to the liberation promised by Jesus' incarnation. Mark's good news starts with the radical notion that, as John the Baptist proclaims, not only can all people be saved, but that the good news is that in moving toward salvation, this gives them an opportunity to change, be a new person, repent.

### **Baptism of the Holy Spirit**

Mark's advent hope does not end with the good news of access to salvation though. Mark makes a much deeper theological claim expressing our longing to be one with each other and one with Christ as his disciples. John is gathering great crowds to his enticing message of a straight path to the divine for all. In an act of prophetic humility John point to the one coming with a greater message, a message that will fulfill an opportunity longed for by all creation. That the Spirit that wanders the earth, blowing where and will it wants will also be given to you through the cleansing power of the one who is salvation.

Mark is opening the door into the great advent promise. Not only are you accepted, and acceptable in the man who becomes "God with us," but we are called to meet his Spirit, and carry it into the world as disciples of the one who set us free. Not only can we be liberated from sin, we can ring that same good news of liberation to the world around us. We can proclaim with merciful confidence to everyone, "You can be free!" Are you in prison, are you a sex worker, are you a banker, are you homeless, do you have hepatitis, do you shoot heroin into your blood, are you a drunk housewife, do you hear voices in your head, do you live in a mansion, are you losing your house to the bank, are you hiding in the shadows because you are not a legal citizen, did you just steal that loaf of bread, did you just steel that elderly woman's paycheck through your employee's window at the

pay day lending service you own? Mark declares the good news: you can be saved!

What gracious hope hinted to us about our future! Salvation can be ours, not only as a one-time act for the individual, but as something that we participate in bringing, through Christ's Spirit, to the world. Everyone is our brother and sister on this one crooked path and we, like John, are making it straight.

### **Advent is a Time to Change Head and Heart**

There is now no more time to lose. We are being shown the straight path. A baptism of repentance requires us today, in this very moment, to begin. Repentance here may be a bit of a mistranslation. We are not talking about a one-time act, but a renewing of our minds and hearts. Metanoia, the Greek Word here, is the belief in the possibility of change. While it is an intellectual changing of our mind, it is also a radical shifting of our heart's purpose.

Even in this advent of waiting, this advent of preparation, this advent of hoping to once again experience the Immanuel (God who is with us) we must see even the fulfillment of incarnation in the light of greater waiting and anticipating. We are waiting on ourselves to fulfill our role in the revelation of God in and amongst us. Let us change our minds about the direction we want to see this world move. Let us break our hardened hearts against those we show partiality, and let us then accept the Spirit of freedom given us to take into the world to bring the promise of salvation.