

Listen to the Voice!

Advent 2; Year B

Mark 1:1-8

My brothers and my sisters in Christ Jesus, as we begin our text for today, we also start the Gospel of Mark. And throughout the coming church year, we will continue to work through this Gospel as we, in the past year, looked primarily at Luke. And the start of the Gospel of Mark, as is very much his style, really wastes no time getting into the action and neither will we: **“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” — “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ”**

The Messiah is coming! This is a fact that had been known by God’s people for a long time. For centuries, God had sent his prophets to the people of Israel, who had revealed time after time in differing degrees of detail that the Messiah would be coming to them. Their King, the anointed one, would come. He would rule an everlasting kingdom; he would come from his people, Israel. He will bring peace to the nations. He would come to redeem them. And year after year, generation after generation, century after century, the faithful believers of Israel patiently watched and waited.

But now, the time for waiting is over. Isaiah and Malachi had prophesied that God would send a herald, a messenger, directly before the coming of the Messiah. He would be a man who would be out in the wilderness. He would prepare the way for this long-awaited, long-expected Messiah. This herald was tasked with grinding down the hills. He was the one to straighten out the crooked road. He would be the one to fill in valleys. To make the way ready for the coming of the King.

And the forerunner took the form of an ascetic prophet we know as John the Baptist. John out in the wilderness, out in the desert, evoking images of the prophet Elijah, as he wore a rough garment made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He foraged food of locusts and wild honey.

John’s message was clear out in that wilderness. **“And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.** If there was any doubt on whether or not this was the herald to come before the Messiah arrived, John’s message made it perfectly known.

And people took notice. **“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.”** The people came from everywhere, from the cities from the countryside. They went to the desert by the Jordan to see this last one—the final one, the messenger, before the King would appear.

And as the crowds came to see, the voice in the wilderness speaks for them to hear. He is coming. But it is no longer some time. He is not coming a long way off. He is coming soon. He is just around the corner. And you are not ready. You are not ready for him. The valleys need to be filled in. The crooked ways in you need to be straightened. The Mountains need to be made low. You are not ready for him.

And there were many, on the banks of the river, in the wilderness, who heard the herald and were astounded. Astounded and full of anger. "What do you mean we're not ready? We've been waiting for hundreds of years for this. We know the commandments. We do what God has required of us in the temple. We are ready as we are Abraham's children. We have avoided evil, we have done what is good, no, more than that, we have gone above and beyond what God has even required. You, John, are wrong."

But there were some, there were many who heard the voice and said: "You are right. I'm a tax collector. I'm a prostitute. I'm a sinner. I haven't kept God's laws. I have not done what is required. I haven't excelled or even done the things that are good. When he comes, I'm not worthy of him. I'm not ready."

What is true then, in the wilderness, is true now, isn't it? Throughout the Scriptures, God has promised that the King is coming back. We just finished up with the season of End Times, and the Scriptures are clear: Be ready. He is coming soon. He is just around the corner. What could be said then could be said now, too: "You are not ready."

We could be like either of those two groups. We could hear that phrase and say like those Pharisees: "What do you mean I'm not ready? I know the commandments, and I keep them.

I go to church. I give faithful offerings. I make sure that I live a pure and decent life. I watch my tongue. What do you mean I'm not ready?"

But more likely, you are like me; you let your eyes drift downwards. And calmly sigh painfully: "You're right, I'm not ready. I'm hardly the example of a pure and holy life that God demands. I have a tongue like a wild beast used for evil. I have often forgotten my God and all he requires of me. When I consider the things I have done, they still don't stack up to what God wants. The things I prided myself on are still not enough to make up for it. I don't deserve him. I'm not ready for him."

Fellow believers, then, how is it possible? How is it possible, with this knowledge, with John the Baptist crying out on the precipice of the Messiah's appearing, crying out that you are not ready, How is possible that Mark says this: **"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."** How is this the beginning of good news? How is a people gathered in a desert, remorseful and wounded by sin, the beginning of good news? How is a sanctuary of people cognizant of their shortcomings and transgressions the beginning of good news?

It's because this voice is the start; it is not the end. The voice of the Law is the voice of God saying you are not ready, and you need someone to make you ready. And I myself will do that for you. When you look at the whole of the Old Testament, the voices of God's heralds drive you relentlessly to the coming Messiah. They point time and time again not to you and your actions but to the coming Messiah, who would not come to condemn his people but to save them. The voice of the Old Testament cries out, look for, look to, the Son of God who comes to save you from your sins!

As you read through the rest of the book of Mark, or the other Gospels, or the New Testament as a whole, the voice of the Gospel drives relentlessly toward one person; it is not you; it is Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. The books cry out and point confidently to the life and actions of Jesus and says: Look! Here is your Messiah. Here is the Son of God who took on flesh and lived the life you couldn't. Here is God in human flesh performing miracles on behalf of sinful people. Here is the promised King wearing a crown of thorns with your sins upon the cross. Here is Jesus, risen from the grave for you. Here is the Christ who took your sins, your transgressions, your shame, your guilt and paid for them all.

How did John the Baptist prepare those people for the coming King? **“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** John prepared the people by letting the voice of God in his Word sound in the middle of the desert. John prepared the people with the only means that can do so; crooked hearts were straightened with the words of the Holy Spirit. Mountains of pride and valleys of despair were filled in with the Word of the coming Savior. He pointed time and time again to the one who was coming, who was coming soon, who was coming to save. And through those means, of Word and Sacrament, of Law and Gospel, those people by God's grace and the Spirit's power, God made a people who were ready for Jesus appearing for the appearance of salvation.

How do we prepare for the coming King? The same way that God has always prepared people, in the Old Testament, in the New, in the wilderness with John the Baptist: Listen to the voice! Listen to the voice of God in Word and Sacrament. Listen to the voice of the prophets who proclaimed the coming of the very Son of God to save sinners wounded by sin. Listen to the voice of the Gospels who, shout the words and works of Jesus Christ completed our behalf to reconcile us to God the Father. Listen to the voice of God through the message of Sacraments, that through your Baptism you have been washed and cleansed, through Communion you receive Jesus' body and blood and there the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. Listen to the voice of the good news of the whole of Scripture. Through that voice, God has made you his repentant people, a people filled with faith in Jesus Christ the Messiah, a people whom Christ bought with his own blood, a people whom Christ himself will come to take to himself once again. Listen to the voice of the heralds of God who say to you: “Jesus is just around the corner, and because of him, You are ready.” Amen.