



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 10, 2023
ISAIAH 40:1-11; PSALM 85:1-2,8-13; 2 PETER 3:8-15A; MARK 1:1-8

PARADOX AND PEACE

Mark 1:1-8 [*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*]

Advent is a paradox and at times, a confusing season with many layers. When we begin a new church year (as we did last week), we change the colors of our vestments and we crack open a new series of readings for each Sunday of the year. Now we are following Year B in the revised common lectionary and it centers the gospel of Mark.

Like any new year, there is a sense of fresh beginning, an open door to the future, a clean slate to write a new story in our own lives and in the life of our community. And, of course, Advent is the time of preparation for the feast

of the Incarnation, when God came among us in human form, an event that changed everything. So we go through these weeks with a growing, anticipatory joy.

But alongside that joy, Advent also carries an apocalyptic tone, with regular reminders that Christ will come again, the veil will be lifted, and everything will be changed once more. As we heard in 2nd Peter, "*The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and everything done on earth will be disclosed.*"

So, we wait soberly and introspectively, seeking to follow Jesus and make way for new heavens and a new earth, where all brokenness, grief, and suffering is washed away. Where, as the psalmist says, “mercy and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

Advent feels particularly paradoxical this year. There are the usual lights and decorations and excitement as children practice for the Christmas pageant and we plan our holiday gatherings. But there is also deep grief and horror at the violence of ongoing war in Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan, the Maghreb and of course, the Holy Land.

Recently, some Israeli hostages have returned home, bringing traumatic accounts of the cruelty and deprivation inflicted upon them. And their neighbors in Gaza now mourn more than 17,000 people killed to date – including 7,000 children. This huge death toll in just two months is made possible by a new artificial intelligence system that can identify 100 targets a day, an unprecedented rate. The Israeli military calls this AI platform “the Gospel.”¹ That’s true.

¹<https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-listening-post/2023/12/9/the-gospel-israel-turns-to-a-new-ai-system-in-the-gaza-war>

In the Sunday forum we just attended, Fr. Fadi Diab of St. Andrew’s Church in Ramallah named the trauma, stress, and depression that characterizes his community in the West Bank as they care for each other and keep their school open for 800 Arab students.

The second Advent candle (the one we lit today) is traditionally regarded as a candle of peace, a light that shines against the shadows of conflict and war. And on this Sunday, we often sing the words of the prophet Isaiah, “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak to Jerusalem that peace waits for her. Her penalty is paid and her warfare is over.*”

Except it’s not. Warfare is far from over. How do we hold the sorrow and grief of that as well as hope and joy? I acknowledge the privilege and safety that allows me to even pose that question. But I know I’m not alone in asking. How do we bear glad witness to God’s healing love while also acknowledging the grave suffering in this world?

It is good to hear Mark’s gospel now, because I imagine these were questions he grappled

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/01/the-gospel-how-israel-uses-ai-to-select-bombing-targets>

with, too. Mark's is the first gospel, written around 70 CE, the time of the first Jewish revolt against Roman imperial occupation. This revolt escalated into full-on war, which culminated in Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple. It was a brutal blow and left the Jewish people bereft and disoriented. Where was God now? Were they forsaken?

Mark writes for this community with an urgency that allows no time in his gospel for prologue or nativity story. Instead, he begins with a terse announcement: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This opening sentence would have snapped his audience to attention. Because, in one short passage, Mark asserts two powerful truths. First, "The beginning of the good news..." Does "the beginning" ring a bell? It echoes Genesis 1, the first words of the Hebrew scriptures.

Dr. Wil Gafney's translation of this verse reads, *"In beginning, He, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and shapeless and darkness covered the face of*

the deep, while She, the Spirit of God pulsed over the face of the waters."

Mark is holding the full story of Christ next to the original, sacred story of creation. He is effectively saying, "We are living a new chapter in the story of God's creativity! Do not fear – God continues to bring the world into being, and now God's realm has come near in the life of Jesus Christ, the one who pours the Holy Spirit upon you."

God's power to create and make new is never spent.

Mark's second big message hinges on his use of the word "εὐαγγελίου (*euangelion*)" (you-ahn-Gel-eon) or "gospel," which means good news. In the ancient world, "gospel" could refer to any significant good news, but it was typically connected with a military victory, when a messenger would return from the battlefield with the gospel of imperial triumph.

And shortly before the time of Jesus, the Roman military hailed Caesar Augustus as "Son of God," and his birthday as "a beginning of good news for the world."²

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2017/12/4/lectionary-commentary-advent-week-two>

So when Mark proclaims the gospel of Christ, the Son of God, he is being bold and subversive. He rejects the idea that Rome's violent power is ordained by God, and instead holds up the mighty, sure example of the peasant from Nazareth who has no army but gathers and inspires common people to live a life of love and healing. This is the Messiah, he says, the one for whom we have waited! God is remaking the world through Christ's example of liberation and wholeness.

This is indeed good news, and it is still beginning. Even on December 10, 2023.

The knowledge of God's love and creative power does not cancel out grief or pain, nor does it absolve human cruelty and evil. One of the fundamental tasks of the spiritual journey is to move beyond binary thinking. The thinking that tempts us to believe that we can either celebrate God's gift at Christmas, or we can honor the suffering of others. Either we heed the call of the Jerusalem Church to a somber, spare Advent or we continue to sing, "Rejoice, rejoice! For Christ is coming soon."

Love is not either/or. If we want to follow Jesus and make way for the beginning that is already happening, we must do both. It's not easy and it requires resolve. It can also require

a re-orientation, a change of course or habit of mind. That is the heart of repentance.

When the prophets name God's desires for the world, they are often paradoxes. Justice *and* mercy. Truth *and* compassion. Gratitude *and* acceptance of mortality.

Our culture rewards a quick and clean choice, not the messy work of holding two seeming opposites together. But when we develop the spiritual strength to protest injustice, grieve the loss of innocent lives, *and* love those we dislike, forgive those who have hurt us, we are leaning into God's new creation. We are practicing hope.

Perhaps this Advent, practicing hope looks like advocacy and generosity for the victims of violence and those in dire need, here at home and throughout the world. *And* gratitude for the blessings of our lives and the warm friendship of this community. We can hold grief and hope together, with God's help.

So, on this second Sunday of Advent, let us each light a candle for a just and lasting peace. For righteousness *and* humility. And may we heed the prophets God is raising up even now, the ones who show us how to practice hope.

Amen.