

Advent 2B: Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

There are so many voices and opinions in the airwaves these days, coming from all directions—outside, inside our heads and hearts—filling space all around. Sometimes, they offer calm and wisdom, sometimes not. Sometimes they ignite our imagination and wonder, sometimes not. Sometimes they help focus us on seeing and living a deeper compassion, sometimes not. Sometimes they speak a word of hope and peace, sometimes not. Sometimes it seems as though there are even more voices and opinions at this time of year, all clamoring for attention. Juggle this, juggle that. Buy this, buy that. Think this, think that. Do this, do that. Into all of those voices and opinions, a voice cries out through the scriptures, speaking three little words very clearly in the gospel on this second Sunday of Advent.

The first little word that comes through, is *beginning*. All those who tell stories are faced with a question of where to begin. *It was a dark and stormy night.* (Snoopy) *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.* (Dickens) Whenever we communicate, we are faced with that question of beginning. The writers of the gospel each answered that question in completely different ways. Luke begins on a high note, with angels appearing to Elizabeth and Mary. Matthew begins with Jesus's genealogy, a long list of who begat whom, going all the way back to Abraham, the ancestor with whom God formed a covenant. Not to be outdone, John begins by going back even further, back to the first creation story, connecting Jesus to that Word that was with God in the very beginning. Mark takes a completely different tack. In Mark, there are no angels, no Mary, Joseph, or Bethlehem, no Herod or Magi, no big theological proclamations about the Word.

In fact, Mark begins with an incomplete sentence, perhaps so excited to get it all down, he forgot to include a verb. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.* And then he references two prophets: Isaiah, a prophet who wrote from a place of exile and desolation, and John the Baptist, a messenger who, by standards then and now, is an outsider. Odd and out-of-step in *appearance* (has a camel's hair tunic, cinched with a leather belt ever been a fashion statement?); odd and out-of-step in *behavior* (locusts and wild honey for breakfast, lunch and dinner); and odd and out-of-step in his message to repent (probably as off-putting now as it was back then). However we slice it, Mark's beginning takes place in the wilderness. Now wilderness is exactly why many of us live here in this place. Our spirituality is so deeply connected with wilderness, just thinking about it makes our ears perk up and hearts begin to beat a little faster. Getting away from it all, out into the elements, is exactly what we yearn for. The wilderness is where we find healing and restoration of our souls. But sometimes wilderness places come to us, unbidden and unwelcome. Disconnection, hopelessness, despair at our own situation or the chaos of the world: those are wilderness places, as well. Wilderness places are places of beginnings, Mark seems to be saying. Where the action gets going. Where somehow we begin to wake up. Where somehow we begin to hear the voice of God for the first time or anew, afresh, piercing through the cacophony or the silence. The beginning happening now, Mark seems to be saying; be expectant.

The second little word is *prepare*. You might have heard that this past week, Taylor Swift was named *Time's* Person of the Year. What intrigued me was to hear how she prepares for her concert tours. She said that she trained for the rigorous schedule of performances by singing her entire setlist while running on her treadmill, every day for six months, before the tour kicked off. I thought that sounded pretty tough. Then, a friend said, *That's impressive, but wait until you see what P!NK does!* The singer P!NK's training regimen includes having her trainer stand on her abdomen, while she lies on her back, belting out her songs. And not just that, but her head and legs are both raised, lifted in that slight V pose. The one that hurts just to watch others do it. (I would demonstrate, except I probably couldn't get back up.) Advent is like the pre-concert tour preparation time. (Advent: Christmas / Pre-concert prep: Tour.) So on this morning when we hear Isaiah and Mark both cry out, *Prepare the way of the*

Lord, make his paths straight, I wonder how we are preparing to expand, ever more graciously and abundantly, to receive and share the good news of recreation, re-awakening, re-birth, repair, recovery, rest, renewal, and all the other RE words that spring to mind. Immerse yourself in the preparation, John the Baptist says this morning. Dive into the water and the Spirit. Go all in—get dunked, baptized— in the ways of God.

The third little word is *repent*. The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney—a Hebrew scholar who has reconfigured the lectionary so that we can hear more clearly the voices of all the women and others who are very present in scripture, but whose voices have mostly been left out of the three-year cycle of Sunday readings—says, of John the Baptist’s call, *We heed the prophet’s call to repentance and baptism...not because our sin has brought calamity upon us, but because in our calamity, we have discerned and cultivated a desire for internal transformation liberation while we await the salvation and redemption of the world around us.* (Women’s Lectionary - Year B text notes, p. 5) In other words, in our calamity, in the wilderness, we yearn for honest conversation about who we are and what we are struggling with and where we are finding or not finding God. Repentance is that act of loosening our grip on that which doesn’t serve us or others, of leaving behind that which we have outgrown or outworn because it doesn’t fit what we know to be true about God or Beloved Community or God’s dream for the world. There is a prayer from the church in the Philippines that goes something like this: *If we have worshipped you without regard for others: forgive us, we repent. If we have heard stories of struggle, without the intention of sharing the burden or pain: forgive us, we repent. If we have sung songs in praise of your creation, while defiling the goodness of the earth: forgive us, we repent.* (*Bread of Tomorrow*, p. 17) Repentance is turning towards that dream of wholeness and healing for all.

Beginning. Prepare. Repent. You might not remember these three little words or you might have three very different little words that stand out to you this morning, to tuck in your pocket like three stones from a beach walk. Like John the Baptist pointing the way to the One who is coming, these three little words point to three bigger words that the God of Isaiah, the God of Mark, the God of the Psalms and the Second Letter of Peter, the God of John the Baptist desperately wants us to remember: You are beloved. I love you. Those are the three words that God speaks, time and time again, from the first Word of creation on through time, to now. If you haven’t heard them before, hear them today. If you have heard them before, but are skeptical, let them wash over you. Soak them in. Receive this good news again: You are beloved. I love you, so says Emmanuel, God-with-us.