



“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The writer of the Gospel according to Mark lays it out- listen! Begin here! Something new is about to be told. Mark, like good storytellers, sets the stage for what is to come.

John the baptizer is a foil for Jesus in the sense that we can see Jesus better or understand Jesus more fully, perhaps, when compared to John. John dresses in camel’s hair and a belt and eats locusts and wild honey. John lives on the outskirts of society

and today we would likely call him a “whacko”. We can liken John to those street corner preachers forecasting doom if we do not repent. We quickly move past them if we don’t move to the other side of the street to avoid them. And yet, sometimes the message they speak is one we need to hear. Most often, though, we are too busy, too embarrassed or afraid of them and so we shut our ears even as we move to our destination.

John is the voice crying out in the wilderness reminding the people that they have strayed from the ways of God set down in the Torah. The people are in need of repentance- a turning around to recalibrate. Perhaps you have Garmin or your phone acts as your GPS. You input your destination and start on your way. And, perhaps due to construction or lack of attention, you get off the set route. And that cheery voice says “stop. Go back.” And that little voice then says “recalibrating. Recalibrating.” And once the GPS has figured out where you are now and how to re-route you so you can get to your destination without too many more side trips or delays.

Advent is a wonderful time to recalibrate. To check our interior GPS and evaluate whether we are on the route to our destination or whether we need to stop and figure out where we need to make changes. Sometimes those changes are difficult and sometimes they are a true blessing. Be alert to what is around you and to what you do in your daily life. Does your life feed you and enable you to be more healthy and heart-whole or does anything cause you to be less healthy or less heart-whole? If the latter, then Advent is a wonderful time to recalibrate and find ways to deal with those obstacles that derail us from the love of God and neighbor.

Today is the 43rd anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. It is a day after the launch of the Orion, the program hoped to enable us to send humans to Mars. It is a Sunday after another week of protests and allegations of flaws in our justice system. What are we to make of Mark’s declarative sentence that this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? How do we reconcile, or if not reconcile learn to live with, such diametrically different headlines?

Isaiah 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:18

The Second Letter of Peter gives us some clues.¹ It was written from an apocalyptic point of view with the belief that the world is corrupt and bound for destruction. Sounds pretty familiar! The writer urges us to focus on the love God has for us and to use that knowledge- the covenant God made with the people of Israel and with us to live lives that trust in the Lord even as in our daily lives it can be hard to see the love of God.

The writer reminds us

“that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation” (2 Peter 3:8-15a).

This is our focus especially during Advent- a period of waiting and expectation for the birth of the baby Jesus and for the second coming of Christ in glory. The in-between time. The time of holding in tension the world and our beliefs. There are some things and approaches that can help us live in this in-between time.

Handel’s oratorio, *The Messiah*, is often offered at this time of year and if you feel like singing along, there is an opportunity on Saturday December 13th in Indianapolis. To me, it is one of the greatest pieces of music. It tells the story of the coming of the Christ child through Scripture and music. The more of our senses that are engaged in an activity, the deeper the message goes and so engaging in music, particularly as a participant although also as a listener can be one way to hold tight to God’s promises when the world around us seems to be falling apart. How many of us have sung, some quietly and some at the top of our lungs, “halleluiah, halleluiah...” and stood when that chorus is sung in respect, following tradition and perhaps even with soul-deep joyfulness in hearing once again that God so loved us that God became human.

The reading from Isaiah: “comfort, o comfort my people, says your God” is the text for one of the earlier segments in *The Messiah*. A reminder that God is ever present. That we are the ones who turn our backs on God. “Our constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades...” (Is. 40:1, 6). God continues, however, to send messengers and prophets to

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *Introduction to 2 Peter*. New Oxford Annotated Bible (Oxford: University Press, 2001) 401.

Isaiah 40:1-11; Ps. 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:18

prepare the way for our salvation. And we wait for the “new heavens and the new earth where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13).

And then there is John the baptizer. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mark 1:3). Movement all around us. God’s presence with us will we or won’t we. Whether we see it or whether we ignore it. Immanuel – God with us.

Movement, journeys, stepping out in faith. Everywhere you look in Scripture and in this place, you see people stepping out in faith. Uncertain about the future but holding fast to a belief that there is life in Christ in this place. Stepping out in faith is another way of dealing with the world as it seemingly disintegrates around us.

One of the gifts that is needed especially during this Advent is the ability to listen. Not to offer advice but to listen – for many of us, it is hard to just listen and not give advice. How many people do you come across in a single day and how many of them would love to be listened to – really listened to and not just a brief “hello, how are you? I’m fine. Good, well have a good day.” Slow down. Be alert to opportunities to reach out to someone you know and listen, really listen. Honor that person by letting them know that you see them, you care about them and what’s on their heart.

Brent Bill reminds us in his book Sacred Compass:

listening says to someone we care about, ‘Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.’ Being invited to share our gift is also a call:
to create a safe place for spiritual investigation,
to embrace hope,
to hear the Spirit,
to encourage faithful obedience.

Sharing our gift honors the truth that God gives each of us opportunities to share spiritually with others on the pilgrim path.²

We are all on the pilgrim path. None of us is alone on this path unless we intentionally choose to be alone. We are here to support each other- to share our stories and to listen to the stories of others. Together we are stronger than we are alone.

Together we walk the highway made straight by the Lord our God. Together we hear the voice of John the Baptizer who has come ahead of Jesus the Christ to remind us that repentance is the precursor to a life filled with joy and hope and a reminder that in our baptism we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.

That is good news indeed. Go. Celebrate. **Amen.**

² Brent Bill. Sacred Compass (Brewster, MN: Paraclete Press, 2008), 148.