

Advent 2, December 6, 2020 (Mk 1:1-8; Is 40:1-11; Ps 85:1-2, 7-13)

The holy gospel according to Mark, the first chapter (Mark 1:1-11)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, 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.’” And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes one more powerful than I. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased.” This is the gospel of our Lord.

GOOD NEWS! **The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.** These are the first words in Mark’s gospel—and you’ll probably agree, it’s about time we have some *good news* after the last eight-and-a-half months of pandemic, economic crises, political unrest, despair and gloom!

MORE GOOD NEWS! There’s good news in the Old Testament, too—but to recognize how very good it is, you need to understand the *context*. Our reading from Isaiah 40 begins Part II of the longest book in the Bible. The first 39 chapters were written at a time when Israel was turning away from God, even turning *against* him. Through the prophet Isaiah God had laid out an overwhelming case against his chosen people.

They’d rejected all that was holy, and ultimately that resulted in the Babylonian captivity. The people of Jerusalem were literally carried off to what is now Iran—and for the next 70 years, they wondered if God still cared about them, if they were still the *chosen people* of God.

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So today's first two verses in chapter 40 must have been the best possible news: **Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her hard service has been completed and her sin has been paid for.** The God whose presence they feared, and whose *absence* they feared even more—*their* God once again wanted to be in relationship with them.

By the time the gospel of Mark was written, more than 600 years later, God had been silent for almost three centuries. There'd been no new prophets, no new scriptures written down or proclaimed among the people of God for hundreds of years.

Imagine the *joy* with which Mark must have been received! **The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.** The *Messiah*, the long-awaited *Deliverer* of the chosen people. The one who would defeat Jerusalem's enemies and put them to shame "before the face of all peoples."

That's an important concept from Bible times. It was believed that the conquering nation had God's favor, so when a former victim (such as Israel) was able to defeat those who'd once conquered them, it was as good as saying, *you see, now you're not so special to God.*

Mark's proclamation immediately lifts up a core value in the heart of the people of God. When they heard the words, **The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah**, they must have felt that hundreds of years of patience were about to be rewarded.

Messiah—God's anointed—would come. *Messiah* would right the wrongs done unto Israel. And the whole world would see that they were indeed God's chosen people.

Note: Here's a word you should know, a Greek word: *euangelion*. Our words *evangelical* and *evangelism* come from that. It means *good news*; it also means *gospel*. Our New Testament contains four *gospels*, four different accounts of *good news*.

And the *good news* is always the proclamation that through his Son Jesus, God is reconciling the world to himself. Through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is doing away with everything that has stood between himself and us.

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One of the things God has abolished through Jesus is our uncertainty about our relationship with him. We know we can never deserve his grace and mercy—but in Jesus, the Messiah, God’s unconditional acceptance of *all* people is made clear.

The voice and actions of Jesus bear constant witness: God shows no preference for the rich, the healthy, the wise, or the holy. **In fact, Jesus spent far more time associating with outcasts and untouchables than with the proper, respectable, religious men of his time and place.**

And his ministry was always about *healing*, about restoring physical, emotional, mental, and social imbalances. His healing always focused on the dignity and worth of every individual he encountered.

So it’s fitting this Advent season to ask ourselves how Jesus is encountering *us*. Mark presents us with **the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah.**

What will the Messiah, the baby in the manger, perceive in your heart when he comes to us as God-in-the-flesh?

- Will you be *alert, watchful*, prepared for his coming in two and a half weeks?
- Do you need to **make straight in the wilderness** of your life **a highway for your God?**
- Is the coming of God to your heart truly *good news*?
- Are there things in your heart or mind or life that might make you squirm if he looks too closely?
- Does his coming make a difference in your every-day life?

In Jesus, God has come into our history to transform the world. He breaks into our lives not only *bringing* good news, but actually *being* good news—the best news anyone could ever imagine: that God, the Father of Jesus and of *us*, loves us unconditionally, and desires nothing more than to have each of us draw near to him.

The only thing that can possibly stand in the way of your relationship with God is your own fear, your own belief, that you’re not good enough for God. That God couldn’t really love you. We all know that God loves *everyone*—but perhaps you believe he loves everyone *except* you.

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And that's not true! God sent his messenger, John the Baptist, to prepare the way for the Lord, to make straight paths for him. John preached a baptism of *repentance*, urging people to recognize their sins and confess them to God, to make room in their hearts for God's deep, sweet forgiveness.

Jesus—God-in-the-flesh!—was baptized by John. **As he was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, saying, *You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.***

And here's the best part: Jesus has invited us—*all of us, each of us*—to become a part of him. Through our baptism into Christ we have his Holy Spirit in our hearts. (Remember, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever!)

And now the words of Isaiah the Prophet speak to *us*: **In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.**

Now God is sending *us* as messengers into the world, to prepare the way for Jesus to come to more people.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah! How far does that *beginning* extend? Is the *beginning* the first chapter of Mark? or all sixteen chapters of Mark's gospel? Does that *beginning* end with the absurdly unexpected resurrection?

The *real good news* never ends. We were joined to Jesus, the Messiah—the Savior who delivers us from our sins into the eternal mercy of God—we were joined to him through our baptism.

From the point at which we accept this *good news* as our salvation, it just gets better and better. It had a beginning, yes—thank God **it will have no end!**