

**“A Prophet in their Context”**  
The Second Sunday in Advent  
10 December 2023  
Trinity+St. Peter’s Episcopal Church  
San Francisco, California

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Isaiah 40:1-11  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13  
II Peter 3:8-15a  
St. Mark 1:1-8

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There is no infancy narrative in Mark. There are no dreams, no shepherds, no Bethlehem, no angels, nor later Magi. There is simply the wilderness, and a wild preacher named John. Mark begins his Gospel in an almost stark manner, and indicates that this beginning (or origin, or foundation, or starting point) will lead to greater things. In a way, Mark mirrors the beginning of all things, as in the creation story. “In the beginning (or origin, or foundation, or starting point) God created the heavens and the earth.” And thus the story begins.

Before Jesus begins his ministry, Mark ties him to the salvation history of Israel. The “Isaiah” that he quotes is really a conflation of Malachi 3:1, Isaiah 40:3, and Exodus 23:20. We will find that Mark uses references to both Second and Third Isaiah a great deal, for they wrote to an Israel freed from exile – a model of what Christ would bring. It also places Mark in their tradition of “universalism”, a covenant with YHWH that could be enjoyed by more than Israel. But more than this, Mark places the beginning in the wilderness, in the nowhere land in the Jordan River valley. Let’s talk about this wilderness for a moment.

So often in the Scriptures we find holy men and women going to (or should I say returning to) the wilderness, to the place where all things began. We must remember that the wilderness not only surrounded Palestine, but was also the stage upon which enormous events occurred: the freedom from Egypt, the giving of the Law, the pilgrimages up to Jerusalem, the return from the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, the retreat of the Essenes, the ministry of John the Baptist, and the place of spiritual refreshment for Jesus. The words that represent “wilderness” in Hebrew (there are several) appear nearly 300 times in the Scriptures. The most cogent reason for this wealth of references is that the wilderness really represents the roots of the people. The movement from being nomads to city dwellers was not absent the influence of the desert. Israel’s rituals, rites, and customs come largely from the wilderness, as does her God. It is not an accident that the Essenes escaped the city, and urban culture, to be refreshed and purified in the desert. All of this leads us to John the Baptist, and Jesus’ own spiritual habits.

There are several models for the ministry of both Jesus and John. Many of the prophets wrote of the hope that Israel could return to their land, crossing the great wilderness

that stood between the Levant and Mesopotamia, or the wilderness that stretched from the Nile River in Egypt across the Sinai and into Palestine. This is the scene of so many events that were remembered in Jewish Ritual, and in Jesus' teaching as well. That John should preach in the wilderness allowed those who were attracted to what he had to say to have a purifying march through a land of nothingness. Rocks, soil, hills, valleys, and a winding road gave them time and place to anticipate what John was going to call them to. In a way those people who walked out into the desert to hear him were mirrors of those who had walked those paths in the hopes of Isaiah, and Jeremiah – returning to their homes and to their God.

The John that we meet in this brief introduction appears to us as a prophet proclaiming, crying out his message, and a Nazirite living in his vows. And here he follows in the example of Samuel and Samson. What does this voice cry out about? The strong words are those of baptism, repentance, and forgiveness. In many respects the baptism that would greet them at the end of their journey was a fulfillment of the purifying effect of that journey, the culmination of what drew them to hear his message.

There is, however, one aspect to his message that stretches the moment from the instance of baptism to the remaining of life, of living in covenant with the God of Israel. John announces, "One mightier than I is coming after me." And in these words we meet the promise and presence of Jesus. In the great altar piece at Isenheim, painted by Grünewald, and hanging in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France, John stands pointing at the cross, and says: "*Illum oportet crescere me autem minui.*" (He must increase, but I must decrease.) Here he represents the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus in his ministry, and the similar humiliation and exaltation that we all experience in living life.

This brings us back to the notion of place. The corner of Gough and Bush is not exactly a wilderness, unless we meet and talk to the people who live here, or anywhere. We each of us have our own wilderness in which we both travel and live. In our encountering this community, we must not only make clear the path in our program of cleaning up the neighborhood but need to understand the words of the prophet Isaiah. We must make real the message that calls John and call us to be prophetic, "*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,'*" Many have not heard this message, the message of Advent, that is muted by the commercialism of Christmas. This message must be completed by the other words of Isaiah, "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*" And suddenly we are not in the wilderness but in the city – in the place where God greets us, and sends a new voice to announce God news – Jesus!

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