

The Second
Sunday of Advent**The Rev.
Stephanie
E. Parker**

Mark 1:1-8

December 4, 2011
Stephanie E. Parker

On this second Sunday of the season of Advent, the Word of God is announced to us as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah and fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. Long ago as the Israelites languished in exile, God declared:

"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.'" In other words, God sends his prophet and says, "Tell them I'm coming to bring them home."

As Christians, we are familiar with this message, "Prepare the way of the Lord," because it is the central message of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the prophet whom God has sent to set the stage for the coming of Jesus as the savior of the world. Jesus, John says, is the One who will lead us once and for all, if we want to follow, into God's promised land of mercy and forgiveness.

John has something to say to the world and like the prophets of old that came before him--- nothing is going to stop him. He isn't concerned with what other people think about him; all he cares about is proclaiming the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist is far more than a man in strange clothes that eats bugs and honey. John is the bridge that spans generations of prophetic silence. He joins the ancient wilderness of exodus and exile to the new wilderness of a people who are lost and in desperate need of a change of heart.

The prophecy of Isaiah promises a new action of God, who will make a victorious way through the wilderness to bring his tired and troubled people home from exile---in today's gospel, this new prophet, John, points to Jesus Christ as that way.

John the Baptist offers a wake up call. Today we are reminded of the stark reality that though we may live in the new Promised Land we can *still* find ourselves lost and wandering.

The nature of life is such that sometimes we can become the *most* lost amid all that is comfortable and familiar. The life of the world is full of promises of happiness and fulfillment--- and all we have to do to win this promise is make more money, spend more money, and above all never show any weakness or vulnerability like admitting we are wrong or forgiving those who we believe have wronged us.

Cynicism and fear can also keep us bound and hopeless--- and the false prophets of this modern age will whisper to us of self-protection and tell us to be suspicious of others.

They try to teach their own Golden rule that will tell us to look out for number one and to do unto others before they can do unto us. --- What passes for wisdom in the world can sometimes blind us to the reality of God's love and steal our hope for the future.

In today's gospel, John bursts onto the scene as an outsider. John has kept his distance from the seductive murmurings of culture and he dares to challenge our conventional loyalties and attitudes.

Our culture often speaks of fulfillment as coming from power and acquisition. John speaks of fulfillment as coming only from God and repentance and forgiveness as the very foundation of true and unassailable joy.

In his wild clothing and abrasive proclamation John appeals to the memory of exile and homecoming, of being lost and then finding our way home. He reminds us that we are lost if we remain rooted in dead end attitudes and behaviors and that we are found when we decide to admit that we're lost and turn around to move in a new direction—a new direction that leads us straight toward God.

John looks and speaks like a prophet of old, but he is also the messenger of a radical newness that is to come. This too is the nature of this season of Advent. Advent is the time in which we are called to look at the old way of doing things, and invited to look at how we too can be made new. John points us to how we are made new when he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The word repent, at least for me, often recalls the cartoonish images of fire and brimstone preachers exhorting us to change our ways before we're consigned to the eternal hot burning flames of hell-fire.

But to repent simply means to come to our senses, to see a new way, a new hope that calls us to turn away from what we've been doing and move toward something new.

Repentance is a movement from punishing resignation into hopeful expectancy. God does not want us to dwell in darkness and guilt. Nothing we have done or failed to do can defeat the beginning of the good news. The beginning of the good news in Mark's gospel heralds the *defeat* of darkness. In Christ the Light has come.

This is the new understanding that John the Baptist is calling for. God wants us to know new hope and new life. This is God's greatest desire for the faithful. God's prophets are calling us away from the things of the world that would bind our hearts and spirits and calling us back home to God's unceasing love. God is calling us back into the freedom of a life defined by God's merciful forgiveness.

In today's Psalm we hear the words: "Mercy and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other." The words of this Psalm resonate with the true nature of repentance and the sweetness of forgiveness.

Repentance and forgiveness are gifts from God that offer transformation and new life. This transformation occurs only when we examine the whole unvarnished truth of our lives and give ourselves over to God's mercy for healing from all that robs our joy.

This is precisely how mercy and truth meet---when we stand vulnerable and unafraid before God and say, "We're lost, bring us home.

Repentance, or put another way--- turning away from hopelessness, finds us letting go of doubt, fear, pride, greed, lust, or anything else that seeks to enslave us.

God's forgiveness comes as release, release from old prisons and old debts. This is what Jesus means when he teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The mercy of God is so great that there is NO dead-end choice that can't be forgiven if that is what we desire.

Choosing to stay locked and lost in guilt, shame or anger keeps us indebted when God yearns to wipe the debt clean and set us free.

John is the messenger of God who is sent to make straight the path and announce the one who is coming. John points us clearly to the coming of Christ and does all he can to deliver the message that God is once again calling us home. God is calling us home from wherever we find ourselves exiled or dead-ended.

God is calling us home from the wilderness of fear, doubt, mistrust, hopelessness or pride; the hopefulness found in knowing God still cares about the world empowers us. The mood of Advent is anticipatory. We are given a call to action---a call claim our participation in bringing God's mercy, justice and peace on the earth.

Advent is a time of waiting, hoping, and *doing*. Advent is a time for anticipating the sweetness of seeing our lives and our world in a whole new light. It is accepting the invitation to start over, fresh like a newborn.

What is it in your life that holds you captive? What wholeness would you like to claim for yourselves so that you might live the life you love. Which dream should you no longer postpone? Advent invites us to stop wasting our lives on fear and love one another for all that we are worth.

God calls us to new hope and new life eternally. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen.

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org