

## Preparing the Way

### Mark 1:1-8

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Imagine you live in Galilee around 70 CE. There's a war on. Some radical Jews have revolted against Rome, and Jerusalem is under siege. Reports are that conditions in the city are bad. People are divided. Some see God raising up leaders to push the infidels from the Holy Land. Others urge submission to Rome as the path to peace and security. Everyone is anxious, caught between resentment of heavy-handed soldiers and fear of extremist guerrillas. Furthermore, Emperor Nero died last year, and there is unrest in Rome. Four men have been acclaimed emperor, only to be assassinated. Now Vespasian, the very general besieging Jerusalem, has been crowned. What does this mean for the war? Things are uncertain. The price of oil is skyrocketing—olive oil, that is. The world is in turmoil. Where do you look for the future?

Your village population is mixed, Jews and Gentiles, and tensions are high. Neighbors fear one another. Families fracture along ethnic lines. One small sect refuses to fight on either side, followers of a Galilean rabbi named Jesus, who was

crucified for insurrection about forty years ago. Roman loyalists suspect them of continuing the alleged insurrection of their founder. The rabbis call them heretics, and the Zealot rebels dismiss their founder as ineffective against Roman oppression. But you are intrigued by their claim that Jesus' crucifixion is a symbol of God's "good news" for Israel and Rome. You ask, if this Jesus really was God's prophet, how is his execution good news for us? Someone hands you a scroll with a title scribbled on it, "The Beginning of the Good News about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God."

The title is provocative. The "good news" is foremost a story about Jesus. The word "messiah" reflects Jewish traditions about the inbreaking of God, who shakes the world, turning it right side up to restore the proper order under God's reign. The designation "Son of God" challenges the claim of *divi filius* or "son of God" found on many Roman coins next to portraits of emperors. So, we might expect this story to challenge the established political order and side with Israel against pagan oppressors. But the story opens with John the Baptist preaching repentance. How does this make sense of the present political turmoil?

To help his readers understand their troubled situation, Mark proclaims Jesus. But to understand Jesus, he looks back to the Scriptures of Israel. Whatever we think God is doing in our world today, and whatever we think God did in Jesus Christ, must be consistent with what God was doing all along in Israel.

Mark says the beginning of the gospel is "just as" Isaiah said. It is not that Isaiah was predicting John the Baptist, but Mark sees an analogy between Isaiah 40:3 and the preaching of John "in the wilderness" (v. 4). Isaiah provides a frame of reference for understanding the Baptist. In its own context, Isaiah 40:3 looks for God's intervention to restore Israel from Babylonian exile. For Mark, John is like the voice that announces "comfort" (Isaiah 40:1) to the exiles in Babylon.

Although first-century Jews were not in exile, they were under foreign occupation.

It was as if the Babylonian exile had followed them home, and Isaiah 40 offered a fitting analogy for those who looked for restoration.

But lest his readers get the wrong idea of a triumphalist stance toward Rome, Mark prefaces his quotation of Isaiah 40:3 with one from Malachi 3:1. That oracle also looks forward to God's intervention, but not for restoration. In Malachi 3-4, God's messenger clears the way (3:2) by calling God's people to repentance. Mark sees an analogy between "Elijah" (Mal. 4:5) and John (Mark 1:6, cf. 2 Kgs. 1:8). Just as Malachi warned of God's judgment against the sins of Israel, so John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). Mark's juxtaposition with Malachi 3:1 causes us to notice that there is also a reprimand in the comforting oracle of Isaiah (40:27). We who look to God to deliver us from our enemies must first examine ourselves to see whether we are fit to stand before a righteous God.

These Scripture proclaims hope for troubled souls and judgment for the self-assured. Against our human tendency to read the Bible in self-justifying ways, confirming our prejudices and excusing our resentments, we must learn to read self-critically, allowing Scripture to correct us. As the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth says, "only when the Bible grasps at us," does it become for us the word of God.

Mark teaches us to see God by looking to Jesus. But to understand Jesus correctly, Mark looks way back to the prophets of Israel. He sees them looking forward in anticipation of God's intervention. When he stands with them and looks as they look, he sees John the Baptist in line with them and looking in the same direction. As Mark looks at John looking at Jesus, he sees himself in perspective (vv. 7-8). And so, with eyes trained by the prophets to look repentantly and trustingly for God, Mark too looks to Jesus. Mark's story invites his readers to see Israel, Rome, and themselves in a different light.

We are like the crowds listening to the prophet John, seeking direction for our future. We look for God's definitive intervention to set things right. John points us to Jesus, who came so long ago and who for us is yet coming. As in the past, Jesus may shock us when he comes and shows us who we really are before God. Our only hope is to join with John in confessing our sins and looking to the coming of the Mightier One. Come, Lord Jesus. **Christopher R. Hutson**

So, what can we learn? First, this second Sunday of Advent is a time for all of us to remember the humility that comes with honoring our antecedents. If Jesus can admit it, so can we. We all have ancestors, people who prepared the way.

The Gospel of Mark starts the Jesus story by looking back to Isaiah, who said, "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.'" Even the Lord needs people to prepare the way.

Second, imagine the reaction among his followers when John said, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." People who are willing to follow someone at least want the reassurance that they are following the right person, and not wasting their time. Who wants to follow the one who is preparing the way for someone else? From a management perspective, John probably should have kept his thoughts about better and future saviors to himself, at least until they had all agreed on a smooth transition plan. But John is not operating from a management perspective; he is a servant of God. Therefore, as a servant, he has no leadership technique—just the call to tell the truth.

Had John not prepared the way, and then admitted it, Advent would be a season not of waiting but of mistakenly believing it has all been accomplished by the latest guru. And that would have been a short season, not one we would remember two thousand years later. For charismatic godly figures come and go, from Isaiah

to John. In fact, preparers of the way are still around. We may be preparers ourselves.

Third, waiting for the savior is humbling. It forces us to admit that the world does not operate on our schedule. And by waiting for the savior, we have to admit the obvious: that he is not here yet. If he is not here yet, that pretty much rules out the possibility that the savior is one of us. It guarantees that it is not you or me.

"I have baptized you with water," John says, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Thank God is our Advent prayer. Thank God we get to prepare, but Christ gets to do the rest. Thank God we can wait, and trust that he will get here in the end.

On television, the latest contestants line up to compete in the national singing talent show. They get voted off one by one, by a fickle audience. The winner, the last performer left standing, seldom admits, and perhaps does not realize, that she is not the last at all.

At the moment when she triumphantly sings the winner's song, which is often about reaching the high point of one's life, she is actually already slipping down from the mountaintop. The last contestant standing is a temporary place holder, merely preparing the way for the next season's winner. Her moment of being the idol will pass very quickly. That is why she is only an idol. No one gets the last word but the living God. And so, we wait and do our part to prepare the way!

**Lillian Daniel**

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