

“The Way: A Voice in the Wilderness” an Advent sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
December 7, 2008 Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA)

TEXT: Mark 1:1-8 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘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”’,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

What does John the Baptist have do with Christmas? For Mark, everything.

In fact, it is Mark’s unique contribution to the church calendar that we have Advent at all! You heard it: Chapter 1, verse one: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” There are no angels here, no first family ordered to Bethlehem, no shepherd’s watching their flocks by night. Mark’s gospel begins with a voice: “There’s a voice calling in the wilderness,” he says, “prepare the way.” Prepare to receive the good news and the good embrace of the good shepherd. Times are hard, but get out there and construct a highway; wake up, get busy, do something different, open your arms and your hearts, hope, believe, forgive and be forgiven.

This voice is attached to strange wild hairy hermit, who evokes the strange behaviors of previous prophets – Isaiah running around Jerusalem naked for three years; Ezekiel laying on his side eating only bread for 390 days; Jeremiah wearing a yoke of straps and bars; Elijah himself also dressed in camel’s hair and a leather belt .

This is Mark’s singular insistence: that the gospel of Jesus begins in the wilderness, with Martha Stewart’s nightmare, and a prophetic call to repent. And so, we have Advent.

Does this seem strange to you? It always has to me. But then, by its very nature, Advent is paradoxical. It is like those never-ending jokes about good news and bad news.

The doctor says, "I have some good news and some bad news."

The patient says, "OK, give me the good news first."

The doctor says, "The good news is, you have 24 hours to live."

The patient replies, "Oh no! If that's the good news, then what's the bad news?"

The doctor says, "The bad news is, I forgot to call you yesterday."

Or good news for me: Mrs. Jones is wild about my sermons.

The bad news is: Mrs. Jones is also wild about the "Gong Show," and "Celebrity Circus."

The bad news in Isaiah is that people are no more permanent than the grass. The good news is that God's words of love and mercy stand forever and can be trusted. The bad news is God is coming, now, soon, to render justice and recompense. The good news is, God is making a way through the wilderness, and will gather the lambs, and gently lead the mother sheep.

The bad news in Mark is that people are in need of repentance. They are too complacent, too fearful, too despairing, too compromising, too self absorbed. The good news is that John is announcing hope and promise, the coming of the One who will baptize with the power of the Holy Spirit.

The bad news in our world today is we've made a terrible mess of things, turning our lives into balance sheets and baptizing our children into the world's culture of consumption and competition. The world is kindled by warfare, and our country is in the middle of two of them. Famine and disease and poverty and genocide abound while we worry about whether we can keep the house at 70 degrees. We have learned to cheat and lie, to measure the good of our lives by goods we have accumulated, to assert self will and self reliance instead of communal good and reliance on God. The good news is that God, can make a crooked path straight, can redeem the mess we've made. The good news is that Christ calls us, calls us away from the greed and ego of self into the waters of baptism, into the presence of the Spirit.

Mark created Advent because without it, the birth story is too easy, too pretty

Our usual way of observing Advent is to reflect on the birth of Jesus and the second coming as moments in history. Mark's Advent asks how we might embrace the shadows and nighttime experiences as God's presence. We are called to the wilderness before we move beyond the wilderness. Advent reminds us that when things seem to be crumbling, falling apart, dying – that is when the new can emerge. But it will not happen without our trust, our patient faith, and our active preparation. Repent, cries the voice in the wilderness. Trust. Follow.

Just what was it that John was asking them to repent of? How about the things Jesus asked us to turn from? Jesus said turn away from anything that creates barriers between human beings. Do not build up walls based on wealth, skin color, social status, gender, ethnicity or heritage. In Kin-dom life, there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free . . . Turn away from that which oppresses another. Stand with the widow at the gate asking for justice, redirect the attention of the one about to cast the first stone in judgment. Turn away from things that isolate us from one another. Poverty and illness are surmountable barriers if you allow them to be. Purity of oneself without care for the other is unacceptable. Jesus said turn away from rules that no longer reflect justice and mercy from ways of acting that are self preserving rather than life preserving. In Kin-dom life, picking grain on the Sabbath is not against the rules, healing the sick or restoring a life are not taboo.

Turn away from self interest and self wealth. Turn away from unjust systems of governance. Speak to the powers that be. Name the wrongs that surround us despite the personal cost.

John comes baptizing in the waters of the Jordan, reminding the people of the time when Israel came through the Red Sea under Moses' leadership and through the Jordan River with Joshua - through the Jordan to the promised land. Both times they were leaving behind the old as they came through the waters, and they were looking forward to the new. John was preaching a new entrance to the promised land. He took the people to the edge. And then to do what? Perhaps to re-invent one's life? Perhaps to re-invent the nation?

Can you hear the message? By the end of both scripture readings, God's faithfulness and covenant are no longer at issue. In fact, the question has changed. It is not whether God will come down, it is rather, are we ready to receive that for which we yearn. Are we open to God's presence and God's power? Can we actually yield our lives, like clay, to the Potter? Are we malleable enough, trusting enough, that God can shape us into something good and beautiful? Or are we too dry and hard and opinionated, too angry or sad or resentful, for the hands of the Potter?

John's call to repent and prepare for the kingdom was a signal to the Hebrew people. It was a signal that the Kingdom of God and their freedom from oppression was near. It was a signal that God had not abandoned them or given up on them. That they were going to have a second chance. They were going to be washed clean, their wrongs erased and given a new start, a new life to live. That voice calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way. Make straight the paths." - was a cry of hope to a desolate people. And all they had to do was repent. Repent, change your ways, believe in God and believe in yourself.

Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate, said Nelson Mandela, but that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some; it is in everyone. And, as we let our own light shine, we consciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Two thousand years ago, during the first Advent, John the Baptist did not think to wear nice clothes, decorate the house beautifully, find the perfect tree and attach precise lights, buy expensive gifts, or cater a banquet when he prepared for the coming Messiah. Rather, he urged a change in people's heart and a new direction in their lives. He made manifest the glory of God within himself even as he pointed the way to the Christ.

There's a voice calling in the wilderness. Wait a minute, I think I recognize that voice, yes, yes, it is, it really is, it's you.