

As Tandy mentioned last week we're in a new sermon series entitled, "Those Who Dream." One question we will continue to ask ourselves throughout this series is, "What does it look like to live as those who dream? The prophets, John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds, the Magi- they were all dreamers. They received, discovered, and responded to God's dreams for the world. In Advent, we step into the mystery and awe of God's dreams and pray that they shape our reality" (*A Sanctified Art*). In Advent, we prepare for both Jesus' birth and also for him to come again (known as the Second Coming). On this 2nd Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves again in Mark's Gospel, the earliest of the four Gospels, written at the height of the Jewish-Roman War. The Romans were about to destroy Jerusalem, including the temple. It was a time of great struggle and disorientation. This is the context in which Mark's Gospel is written. Unlike the words found in the carol, *What Child Is This*, there is no birth story in Mark's Gospel. Mark tells us in his opening words that Jesus is the Son of God. He doesn't need stories of a miraculous or mysterious birth to 'prove' that. In Mark with just "a few quick brushstrokes, the saga of the good news of Jesus Christ is launched" (*Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes*, Cynthia B. Campbell). Before we read today's Gospel reading, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in Mark 1:1-8. **READ.**

Mark's opening verse is the beginning of more than a Gospel; it is the beginning of God's plan of salvation in a specific person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. "The news about Jesus is good, not because of what will happen to Jesus; it is good because Jesus' ministry makes powerfully transformative things happen for others" (*The Discipleship Study Bible*). The good news in Mark's Gospel begins

with a hearkening back to the words of the prophets. Here in these first few verses Mark combines quotes from Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1) to introduce John the Baptist, whom we know from Luke's Gospel as Jesus' cousin. As Christians we cannot understand our faith adequately without understanding the Jewish roots of that faith. "The promises God made to Israel through the voices of prophets like Malachi and Isaiah are being fulfilled in Jesus Christ" (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*). John the Baptist, in his ministry as a messenger, helps us to prepare the way for Jesus. In the ancient world, the arrival of a king and Messiah required a herald; a messenger. "The messenger was the press release or the Facebook post or the tweet of that time" (Campbell). The message? "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

*Advent is the Church's way of observing and remembering, of marking the truth we believe that **God came to be with us once, and God is still with us, and God is coming again to set all things right*** (Bessey). During Advent, we talk a lot about preparing for Jesus but how do we really prepare? Just as the prophet Isaiah prophesied about a voice crying out in the wilderness, Mark places John firmly into Isaiah's prophesy. And just as context is important in scripture, so is location. Why does Scripture ask us to dwell in the wilderness in Advent? Shouldn't we be focusing on the nativity story instead of "this wild-eyed man wearing the same clothes as Elijah of old, eating bugs, bellowing in the wilderness? Yet, **here we are. Right where we belong: in the wilderness, with prophets and preachers, and the invitation of repentance and to join in the work declared by ancient poet-prophets** (Sarah Bessey, *Field Notes*).

“The wilderness is a place that lays us bare. A place where life is raw and risky, and our illusions of self-sufficiency fall apart. The wilderness softens us towards repentance” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). John is in the wilderness- not in the temple or city but away from everything his listeners consider routine and familiar- when he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (v. 4). Like it or not, “Advent begins with an honest, wilderness-style reckoning with sin” (Thomas). Let’s pause here and name that for many of us the words “sin” and “repentance” are loaded words filled with negative connotations. Some of us associate “sin” with guilt, self-loathing, and hellfire. We approach with fear rather than confidence even though we’re promised forgiveness. We all sin and fall short of God’s glory, which is why we confess every week in worship. Confession is an ongoing posture of discipleship among sinners and saints- done as individuals and as a community of faith. The interesting thing is that the Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which means “change of mind” or “to turn around,” facing a new direction; it carries no guilt, no shame. As Lutheran pastor and writer Nadia Bolz Weber says, “You know how people were prepared to receive Christ? By admitting first that they needed him. And to be clear,” she continues, “repentance isn’t about feeling bad. It’s about freeing yourself from holding onto your own stuff. Repentance is about freedom. It’s about being changed” (Advent sermon on the Turmoil in America, Repentance, and Confession). And then there are those of us who don’t like change, either. Regardless, we can’t expect to remain the same and prepare the way for Jesus.

What is so surprising to me in this text is that we’re told that people from both the countryside and Jerusalem were coming out to the wilderness to confess their sins and be baptized by John (v. 5). These were people hungry- desperate even-

for change...for transformation...for forgiveness...for good news. These were people- like you and me- who longed for a new beginning- a new lease on life. “Repentance prepares us to receive the good news Jesus brings. A change of heart and mind that allows us to let go of old ways of life, old burdens and wrongs, and to know we are forgiven and loved makes us more ready to hear and believe that Jesus can bring us new life” (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*)!

As the days become shorter and the light diminishes, many of us are anxious. So many things in our world seem unknown and unsettled: the pandemic, racial injustice, climate change, a nation deeply divided, job losses, etc. Remember that today’s Gospel lesson is not about the syrupy-ness of hallmark cards; it is rather good news from a place of struggle. John’s message is simple: repent. So from what do you need to repent in order to prepare the way? Let us repent and be a people changed by God and reoriented by God’s dreams for this world. Because in the tender love and compassion of God, we are sent a Savior. It’s too difficult to hold onto our stuff with one hand and reach for Jesus with the other (NBW). Therefore, with our stubborn faith and our grieving hope, let’s repent and then dream God’s dream for this world as we prepare the way of the Lord. Yes, even the Lord needs people, like John the Baptist, to prepare the way.

For me and many others, Congressman John Lewis was a modern-day John the Baptist of sorts. No he didn’t wear camel’s hair or eat locusts (at least that I knew of), but he spent his life in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord- pointing to Jesus- calling for repentance. I have a picture hanging in my office and me and Congressman Lewis that he signed, “Keep the faith, Preacher!” He helped to prepare the way by offering peaceful, nonviolent protests in the midst of racial

injustice over a span of sixty+ years- in the midst of being beaten, ridiculed, and jailed. Congressman Lewis' family called him "Preacher," as from a very young age, he would preach to the chickens in the yard, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to them and anyone who would listen. A few days before his death this past summer, 80 year-old Congressman Lewis sent in his last words to be published on the day of his funeral as an Op Ed by *The New York Times*. His words expressed the hope for national healing and reconciliation that guided his life's faith and work. He ended with these words, *Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring. When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.* At his funeral the Rev. James Lawson, professor and civil rights activist, closed his remarks by sharing the poem, *I Dream A World*, by Langston Hughes. "I dream a world where man no other man will scorn, where love will bless the earth and peace its paths adorn. I dream a world where all will know sweet freedom's way, where greed no longer saps the soul nor avarice blights our day. A world I dream where black or white, whatever race you be, will share the bounties of the earth and every man is free. Where wretchedness will hang its head and joy, like a pearl, attends the needs of all [hu]mankind- of such I dream, my world" (*The Collection Poems of Langston Hughes*)!

John the Baptist proclaims that one who is more powerful than he is coming after him- one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Of course he is talking about Jesus. Only God can accomplish our salvation. And our hope for salvation- our peace in the midst of suffering- IS in the One coming. John points us to Jesus, who came so long ago and who for us is yet coming. May we believe the good news of Jesus Christ and prepare the way! For to pay attention to the prophets is to align our dreams with God's dreams for the world so may we live accordingly. May we dream that we, like the prophets, can become brave voices crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. May we dream that through our repentance God will bring about such reversals...such transformations in ourselves and in our world. May we dream to go *all in*, to bet everything that God's justice will prevail and love will win saying, "Come, Lord Jesus." There may be no birth story in Mark, but it is good to tell of new beginnings, to tell of a God who breaks into our time with good news. Friends, may we prepare the way of the Lord and repent! Jesus is coming! Hear and believe this good news- even in the midst of struggle! Keep the faith, friends! Thanks be to God. Amen.