

Mark 1:1-8
Advent 2
December 6, 2020

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, I want to draw your attention to how the Gospel of Mark begins.

It says – the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ starts with a prophecy, not with Jesus' birth, but God's promise.

In a summary of the prophecy found in Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi, God announces that the time that has been promised is now among the people. Prepare the way of the Lord, because he is on the way.

So Mark opens with John in the Wilderness at the same place where the Israelites entered into the Promised Land at least 1400 years before and maybe well over 2000. Talk about waiting for it! Oy!

Prior to John in the Wilderness, God hadn't spoken to anyone for well over 400 years. Malachi was the last prophet to get a message from God and then there was nothing. Complete silence.

So, when John announces in the River Jordan that the Lord is on the way, those who had been waiting for it rush to the place of crossing to reenact the entrance into the Promised Land, to rededicate themselves to God.

In an act of repentance, the people return to the river their ancestors had crossed after hearing from Moses that in order to have the Land they needed to remain in God's covenant and worship God alone, a covenant that they broke, which sent them into exile in Assyria and then Babylon. And then upon their return to their home land, they were held captive by the Persians, Greeks, and then Rome.

They were home, but they were not free. Would God hold them captive in their guilt forever? Some may have thought yes, but everyone knew the promise of God's steadfast love.

So, for those who had been waiting for salvation, John in the River was the sign they had been waiting for. It was a sign of hope. It was the promise they had been told their whole lives being fulfilled.

God hadn't forgotten them or given up on them. The good news is that in God, there is forgiveness – there is reconciliation.

Comfort. O Comfort my people, says our God. God does not leave us abandoned and Jesus is the physical manifestation of God's unending love.

During these times of Covid with the increased death and positivity rates, we may be in despair, but God's message is always – Comfort. O Comfort my people. You are not abandoned. You are not alone. You are not hated.

God comes to us in hope.

And so during Advent, as the days get shorter and the nights longer and darker, we light candles. As the darkness creeps in, we light candles, because we have God's comfort, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, and we know through his death and resurrection that darkness does not have the final say.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. He is the light no darkness can overcome. In him, we are comforted by God's unending love, and that is the light we pick up in baptism and take out into the world.

Let your light so shine before others that they may see your works of love and give glory to God for Jesus Christ who is active in us through the Holy Spirit, enabling us to be his physical presence in the world here and now – so that those who are sick, angry, lonely, or despairing can be comforted.

Depression is on the rise and suicide rates are increasing. Those numbers are even more exasperated by Covid. People are despondent, and we are being called to bring comfort into the darkness. People are in need of some light to shine on them so that they can have hope, and their hope can be turned into joy, and we do that by sharing God's peace.

Comfort. O comfort my people. Relax. Be at ease. Do not worry. Do not be afraid. You are not abandoned. You are the beloved of God. <deep breath>

In many Scandinavian countries, where the darkness is really dark during this time of year, they practice the art of getting cozy. They light candles and drink hot drinks and get wrapped up in fluffy blankets. Instead of cursing the cold and darkness, they welcome it as a time to rest and relax, and to be comforted, knowing that this is just a passing season. Come Spring there will be plenty to do, but for now it's time to just get cozy and let the world rest.

Comfort. O comfort my people. God is in control. God hasn't abandoned us. God is with us always. That's the promise – a fulfilled promise – and a promise for the future as well.

Within Advent we celebrate the past, present, and future. We celebrate prophecy of old. We celebrate Jesus' birth and the fulfilling of that promise. We celebrate that through the Holy Spirit we are living that promise right now. And, we rest in hope knowing that Jesus will return to us again in the flesh to bring God's Kingdom into fullness – God's kingdom of love for all of creation will be made complete.

In that hope, in our coziness of God's love, we take our blankets of love that enfold us and share them with others so that everyone can be made cozy and take comfort in God's love. Comfort. O Comfort my people.

As you may or may not know, today is St. Nicholas' Day. If you are a staunch German, you probably woke up to candy in your shoes this morning.

St. Nick likes to drop by to bring people treats as a reminder that God provides, and God does that through ordinary people like you and me. That's why St. Nickolas is actually one of your family members or friends.

Many of our traditions around Santa Claus actually go back to St. Nickolas. As a bishop, St. Nick wore red clothing. He carried the bishop's crook, which looks like a candy cane, and we hang our stockings by the fireplace, because of an act of comfort St. Nickolas did for a poor family.

St. Nicholas was a bishop in Turkey in the 4th Century. At that time there was great poverty among the Christians and many were going hungry. Because of their poverty, some people were sold into slavery so that their family could eat.

One night, in great despair, a father of three daughters resigned himself to the fact that he would have to sell one of his daughter into slavery so that the rest of the family could eat. In great sadness, the daughters washed their socks and hung them by the fire to dry.

In darkness, literally and figuratively, they went to bed, although I'm sure they didn't sleep much. The next morning the girls went to get their socks so that they could get dressed, and to their great surprise, the daughter who was going to be sold into slavery found gold coins in one of her socks.

In the light, they received comfort. The daughter would not have to be sold and the family could eat, and live.

As the story goes, St. Nicholas, knowing the family's great struggle, gathered all he could and threw the gold coins from an open window into her sock.

He did that act of love so that this family could have life instead of death, so that she could be free instead of held captive, so that they could have joy instead of sorrow.

And, he did it anonymously, so that all glory would be given to God, and not to him. Like John, he was pointing to God, not himself. He was preparing the way for Jesus to arrive in their lives, and through this free gift he made the way flat and straight for this poor family. There were no obstacles, no obligations, no requirements at all.

So today, we remember John in the River and St. Nicholas at the window, each preparing the way of the Lord for the sake of others in order to bring those who are hopeless comfort.

Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

The season of Advent is all about hope in the midst of waiting. It's knowing the smell of irises and the taste of fresh strawberries in the deep cold and darkness of winter. We wait for it knowing just how sweet they will be when Spring returns, and we share that hope with others, embodying God's love in whatever way we can.

Comfort. O Comfort my people says our Lord.

We are comforted, so we comfort others. Comforted we are sent to comfort all of God's people, because no one is outside of God's love.

That's the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Thanks be to God. Amen.