

“Listen to the Voice in the Desert”

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Mark 1.1-8

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As our days draw closer to celebrating the birth of Jesus, this second Sunday of Advent brings us a reading from Mark 1:1-8. These verses present the gospel of Mark. They include a short story about John the Baptist and his prophetic ministry.

But there is something else going on in these verses. Let's imagine, for a moment, how a Jewish person felt living in Judea in the early 1st century during the Roman Empire, longing for independence, seeing injustice and corruption all around them, while also seeking the restoration of the kingdom of God in the earth. If we can imagine that, then the beginning of Mark's gospel becomes more than just words.

The Gospel of Mark announces a hope that responds to the needs and sufferings of the people. These opening verses in Mark provide those who come to the gospel with the awareness that something new is about to happen. Something that we must also recognize as we contemplate and anticipate the birth of Jesus.

The gospel of Mark begins with the phrase “Beginning of the gospel” (v. 1). We may think that these words are only about evangelism, but the word “gospel,” which literally means “good news,” has been used before.

In the city of Priene, Turkey, archaeologists found two stone tablets. They included an inscription dedicated to the birthday of Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, which was also announced as “the beginning of good news for the world,” that is, the same Greek word gospel had been used to celebrate the birthday of Caesar Augustus. By using this same word to announce the beginning of his book, Mark indicates to his readers that the good news of Jesus as the “Messiah” and “Son of God” is a statement with social implications.

It means that the anointed son of God breaks into our history and our environment and our reality, and that, therefore, he must be received as the best news for all people on

earth. The real good news is not about Caesar or which emperor sits on the throne, but it is about Jesus.

This proclamation of Jesus' identity is followed by the introduction of a prophetic hope in vv. 2-3, made up of a mixture of various passages from Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20, which draws our attention to the experience of the Hebrew people in the desert and God's anticipated salvation.

The call to “prepare the way” and “make straight your paths” are familiar phrases from the Ancient Near East that describe the advance guards during royal visits or military campaigns, to have everything ready for the arrival of those they expected. Mark applies this prophetic message to Jesus. Mark presents Jesus as the liberator that the prophets longed for. And the messenger who announces this proclamation John the Baptist.

John emerges in the gospel from the desert. His appearance marks a turning point in the history of salvation. For the first time in a long time, a prophet appears on the scene speaking the words of God. John is described as preaching “the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4). His message attracted many people from Judea and Jerusalem. They all came to him to confess their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River (v. 5). The Jewish people heard John's message. And wherever they were, they answered and found him in the wilderness. They prepared because they believed that God's visitation was indeed going to occur.

John's message was simple; It was a message of repentance. He preached: “He who is more powerful than I is coming after me, whose latchet I am not worthy to untie, stooping, the thong of his shoe. I have indeed baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (vv. 7-8).

Many people were attracted to Juan and went out into the desert to see him. In many ways, there was nothing to look at. He wasn't the one people should focus on. He was just a voice, urging the people to repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord. His presence in the desert and the invitation to be baptized in the Jordan River was a strong

message. He reminded the Jewish people that they were not ready to receive a visit from their liberating God. They needed to be renewed and baptized in the river in the same way that the Hebrew people had prepared themselves and crossed the Jordan River with Joshua (Joshua 4:1).

John's message prepared them to receive God's salvation by exhorting them to repent of their sins, return to the desert like their ancestors, and prepare for the new liberator, the one who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

John's message is also addressed to us who need to hear the implications of Jesus' coming. We must listen to the good news, not only with evangelistic ears, but with the understanding that a new reality is coming for the world. There is not a new king, a new emperor or president coming. Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, is coming. We also need to hear the announcement of today's prophets. Those who call us to the desert and invite us to prepare the way of the Lord.

For many of us this announcement is really good news. The Lord is coming. It will be the biggest event of our lives. For those who are not willing to repent, this announcement by John the Baptist is a warning. The coming of the Lord will bring a total reordering of the political system and the status quo.

We are faced with a choice, to listen to the Baptist and go to the desert, or to remain in our home, ignoring the call that urges us to prepare the way for the Lord.