

Dec. 4, 2011 Church of the Covenant, Rob Mark
Candidating Sunday: Advent 2
Wild Beginnings

Scripture: First Reading Isaiah 40:1-11, Gospel Mark 1:1-8

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from God's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.⁵Then the glory of God shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the GOD has spoken."⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of GOD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"¹⁰See, the one GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make God's paths straight,'"

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵And 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.⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.⁷He 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.⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

PEACE BE WITH YOU

It is with great humility, honor and gratitude that I stand here in this place within this beautiful sanctuary – and before this beautiful body of Christ. Thanks be to God.

Let us Pray:

Emmanuel, Take our mouths and speak with them

Take our minds and think through them

Take our hands and work with them

And take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

Where in the world do we begin?

This is a critical question for us as people of faith.

Where **in the world** do we begin?

Place matters when we talk about faith.

Some recent images of places that have stood out to me from the past few weeks:

Ordinary people, camped out in tents in public.

Pepper spray being used against the innocent.

Mayhem, confusion, selfish pursuit of goals.

Although they sound like it, these images are not from the Occupy Movement – they are snapshots from the past week and a half since Thanksgiving. People sleeping in tents in line awaiting the best deal outside of Best Buy. And a Walmart shopper using pepper spray to clear out the competition in pursuit of special bargains.

What **in the world** is happening?

We are in the beginning of that season that arrives each time this year:

ADV---vertisement Insanity.

Look around. Those carefully researched and marketed images enticing us to consume are once again boldly declaring that the holidays are once again at hand. It seems this year the Advertisement Insanity has crept to historic new lows: from Cyber Monday this past week, to Black Friday which has now reached back into to once sacrosanct Thanksgiving day, beaoning us to leave our tables and buy stuff.

But thankfully, here as we gather as church in this place, a different narrative is told. We follow not the way of Advertisements – but the way of ADVent.

Advent is a precious gift to the church. It is a time we set apart to intentionally mark these weeks through advent wreaths, & calendars, greens, familiar songs, and special rituals to remember the mystery of Incarnation. Emmanuel- God with us.

For we remember Advent comes from the Latin term *advenio* – meaning = to come.

During Advent, we are invited to remember the coming of Christ. The movement of God into our very midst.

During Advent, we celebrate the fact that **place** matters. If God is with us, then where we are makes a difference.

Where do we find ourselves this morning?

Apart from the excitement of Advent, new Christmas greens, and possible intrigue over a new candidate standing before you – I’m guessing some of us find ourselves carrying some burdens of living **in the world** with us. The realities of darkness. Most of us have specific names and faces that are connected to the world’s darkness around violence, poverty, and inequality.

I name two in particular I carry with me. Today, a friend of my spouse and I named Anna, is being forced to fly back to Guatemala as her legitimate visa was revoked 6 years early because she had to use medical services while here in the US on a visit to her husband. And I bring the heaviness my colleague and friend John is feeling now having just heard yesterday about his wife’s tumor being cancerous.

We live in the midst of darkness, and it is good sometimes simply to acknowledge that to one another. I’m grateful for the red book in this place that leads us to bring our concerns before God in prayer later in this service.

Indeed, it is good to be together in this place at this particular time...and to acknowledge honestly the place of our hearts.

I also carry in my heart feelings of gratitude for some of the new faces I have met here in this place over the past few days, as I’ve been invited into your midst in a special way. I have enjoyed sharing some basic but life-giving questions with a representative handful of you. “Where were you born? Where do you live?”

These exchanges have of course only scratched the surface of relationship building – but these sacred scratches have been exciting and life-giving. For they represent an honest mutual sharing of some of the literal places that define us as fellow sojourners in faith. The **places** in our life help tell some of our **story**.

And so as we continue in our story of Advent this morning, we hear about the place of beginning.

And so this morning, as we encounter the continued **story** of Advent, we hear about the **place** of beginning.

The beginning of beginnings in fact.

The first Greek word from the Gospel of Mark (*arkay*) parallels the first Hebrew word in the book of Genesis- (*bereshith*) - **beginning**.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mark’s gospel announces to us with fanfare the beginning of the *euangelion* of Jesus. This Greek word best translated as “good news” was a widely understood term for people in 1st century Palestine, as it was commonly used by the Romans to describe a new victory by Caesar’s armies. “Good news” was a term supporting the imperial propaganda that war was the way to bring order, peace and quite literally salvation. And so the author of Mark has a subversive agenda- to reclaim and turn on its head the meaning of good news. And the invitation is for us to pay special attention to the **place** that Mark associates with the proclamation of peace in a new, profoundly non-violent way:

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s paths straight,’”

In Mark, unlike in Matthew, the beginning of the gospel has no Mary & Joseph, no angels, nor star-following magi.

And unlike Luke, the beginning includes no leaping John the Baptist in the womb, no inn, no manger and no shepherds keeping watch of their flock by night.

Mark echoes Isaiah and begins simply in the wilderness.

What images come to mind when we think about wilderness?

Negative ones may surface: Bleak. Alone. Stillness. Survival. Cold. Desert. Desolate. Challenging. Struggle. Testing. Chaos.

Our sacred scriptures sometimes refer to the wilderness in such light:

Just a few verses later in Mark, Jesus experiences wilderness as temptation and trial as he is driven out for 40 days directly following his baptism.

And the Hebrew people in Exodus experience wilderness for 40 years as a form of punishment from lack of faith and disobedience.

Wilderness as chaos.

The good news emerges from such a place.

From the mouth of the rough and tumble, unkempt prophet John the Baptizer.

Camel-hair clad, locust and honey-eating – a wild voice for forgiveness and repentance in the midst of the wilderness.

The subversive good news comes out of the unpredictable, the unexpected, the chaotic, uncharted waters of life. From the mouths of people we least expect it.

The gospel declaring forgiveness comes to us in the very midst of the chaos of life.

Hope comes to us from the dark.

Of course, not all of our images of wilderness are negative.

Images of: freedom, outdoors, beauty, adventure, simplicity, introspection, purification, spiritual renewal, clarity may also come to mind.

And of course our scriptures also support such positive images:

Later in Mark, Jesus often goes off by himself into the wilderness or up mountains to find clarity and God's presence.

The Hebrew people also find direct liberation from Pharaoh's bondage in the wilderness. And up on that wild mountain of Sinai they receive stone-tablet instructions on how to construct a loving, intentional community.

Wilderness as clarity.

Rabbi Shefa Gold of New Mexico reminds us that, "The word for wilderness in Hebrew is *Midbar*, which can be understood as the place without (mi) speech (daber). It is the place of silence from which all speech, all meaning is born."

And this is the hopeful invitation of Advent. To be prepared for a way that in unusual, unexpected. But one that leads to greater clarity and intimacy with God.

Just as the Baptizer called Israel out to the wilderness, so too we are called out of the familiar. To see with new eyes God breaking forth in the very midst of the places we find ourselves in. To see God in the midst of new, wild beginnings.

I would venture to guess I am not alone in seeing signs of the Spirit breaking forth in the midst of the Occupy movement. I have been moved by the way so many across this country and world are speaking out for greater economic justice and voice. The timely confluence of Occupy and Advent may very be an invitation to pay closer attention to Emmanuel in our midst. To Occupy is to publically acknowledge that that like Isaiah, things are not all right with our systems and structures, the rough places need to be made plain.

Recently, a Taiwanese graduate student who volunteers at the Community Day Center located at the Waltham church, asked me what Presbyterianism meant. After I explained some denominational history he said, "O, so Presbyterians are **PROTEST**ants?" After almost correcting his pronunciation, I smiled and recognized the truth in his honest mistake. Yes, we Protestants are rooted in a history of **protest** over systems that become corrupt. It is certainly not hard to imagine John the Baptist present in prophetic protest in the squares of OccupyBoston or Wall Street, calling all to repentance and forgiveness.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.⁵ Then the glory of God shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the GOD has spoken."

Cue George Handel's protest chant from the Messiah: "Every valley, every valley, shall be exalted. The mountains and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain."

These are profound promises of justice. The Messiah soundtrack should be playing down at Dewey Square, and Tahrir Square these days.

This is the call of Advent.

To prepare, to watch to listen to wait – for the promise of God's spirit breaking into our world. Especially in the places where there is injustice. Creating. Brining new life. New beginnings. In the midst of that which is wild.

There is a wonderful little book by John McQuiston that focuses on the rule of Saint Benedict, called "Always, we begin again." And the image on the cover of the book has always stuck out to me. It is the photo of a wide opened door in the very center of a wild, untamed and expansive green field.

I love this image as it speaks to the Benedictine understanding that God is ultimately everywhere, and in every moment. And therefore, every moment is a new beginning. A new chance to encounter God, and thus find repentance, forgiveness, renewal, justice, peace. Always we begin again – always wild beginnings.

You church of the Covenant knows wild beginnings.

You celebrate wild beginnings every time a new face walks through those newly renovated doors and is welcomed in love.

You've celebrated wild beginnings every time over the past 175 years countless numbers of faithful souls have reached out in compassion, justice and peace.

You celebrated a wild beginning when Jennifer first came into your midst over 4 years ago.

You celebrated wild beginnings every time so many previous faithful ministers have joined you as sojourners along the way.

You celebrated a wild beginning in 1995 when you began a sister relationship with Dulce Nombre de Jesus in Nicaragua.

You celebrated wild beginnings in the late 70's when you became a beacon for greater equality in the church, becoming one of the first More Light Congregations in the PCUSA and helping to found the Open and Affirming movement in the UCC.

You celebrated a wild beginning in 1931 when Central Congregational and First Presbyterian agreed to become a federated church.

You celebrated a wild beginning when construction of this very building first began in 1865.

You celebrated wild beginnings when Knox Presbyterian was founded in 1853, and when Central Congregational Church was founded in 1835.

Friends, Advent reminds us that in all of these wild beginnings, and the countless others left unnamed, the Spirit has always been present. The way has been prepared, and will be prepared as you walk ahead in faith.

So as you continue along the path of wild beginnings, remember to look back at where you've sensed the Spirit in your midst in the past. And hear Isaiah's comforting chant: **"O Covenant, herald of good tidings, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"** Here, in this place. Where two or three are faithfully gathered, here the Spirit is present. God is breaking into the fabric of our lives, with the words, COMFORT. Comfort, YOU MY PEOPLE.

The Good news is in the midst of the chaos, there is comfort. There is justice.

In the chaos that is our current economic system that leaves too many poor, there are modern John the Baptists Occupying city centers around the globe, asking us to turn-around.

There are the courageous souls marching in Durban South Africa this week adding to that great anti-apartheid chant "amandla,"/ "climate justice now!"

There are people here in our midst who are doing the radically courageous work of standing at hospital bedsides being the hands and feet of Jesus whispering, "the valleys shall be exalted, the light is more powerful than the darkness."

In that classic liberation theological imperative, "We make the road by walking".

Walking into the wild beginnings as people of Advent, as people of hope, as the body of Christ. Trusting that as we walk, the Spirit is already present with us, calling us to take comfort and not to fear.

It is difficult not to feel both comforted and awe-inspired when one looks out into this space born of such faithful and wild roots. The nativity scene so conveniently located for those of us leading worship – and not so conveniently for most of you – is not only seasonally appropriate, but deeply inspiring.

The promise of Emmanuel in our midst is **inspiring**. It is also **con**-spiring. For Theologian Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the word conspire comes from the Latin root meaning **to breathe together**.

The good news of God with us is a conspiracy to get us humans to breathe, work, worship and live together! Which we know sometimes, is no easy task!

This is the wild, untamed invitation of Advent.

And to remind ourselves of this call to breathe together, we are given the gift of communion. This holy sacrament, this ordinary table – a place where all are welcomed, and a place to taste grace.

So, this advent, may we **conspire** together.

Let us say no to the Way of ADVERTisements, and yes to the Way of Emmanuel.

Let us **commune** together more often than we **consume**.

And let us not be afraid. From wherever **in the world** we find ourselves. There God is. The Spirit leads us on.

May we find comfort and challenge in this wild promise. Wild covenant. Wild grace. In the name of the one who is always beginning, who is always now, who is always Emmanuel- God with us, AMEN.
