

Mark 1: 1-8 The Second Sunday of Advent, December 5&6, 2020

This is the Church's Season. A season of faith and hope, of comfort and good will, Angels and the baby born in a stable, who will become the Savior of all Humankind. That's the story we tell. If we suddenly become rabid hounds, slavering and chasing the elusive rabbit of being right and being in charge, snarling at and threatening everyone who believes differently than we do, then no one will listen to the message. All they will hear is the growling and snarling. All they will see is the slavering and bared teeth. Is that why Jesus was born? Is that why Jesus died on the cross? Aren't His weapons Grace, Love, Mercy, Reconciliation and Forgiveness? Aren't slavering and growling the weapons of the enemy?

If we want to reclaim Christmas, then we have to reclaim the ways of the Christ child and of the Savior. We can't be like the world, we have to live in it but not live like it. Maybe that's why the central character of today's passage of Scripture doesn't seem to fit. Every year during the cycle of Scripture readings one of the most unlikely of characters shows up in the midst of our Christmas celebrations. His appearance, for some, is like finger nails on a chalkboard. I'm talking about the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptizer. Standing there beside the Jordan river hollering "Repent" doesn't seem very Christmassy or very comforting. But actually, John is proclaiming a message of Comfort, answering the call of Isaiah by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. The Isaiah passage carries with it so many good themes for Advent. One is God's care and the need for people to know it even as they live through changing and challenging times. A second is the anticipation of eschatological blessing. Isaiah's poetic words point in a future direction, but do not fully flesh out that picture. Part of the vision is, of course, the ministry and message of Jesus. But much is still to come, as Peter reminds us, and in the anticipation itself, there is growing energy and hope. This is what people need every Advent season. Third, there is in this passage the dynamic call to participation in the process. We hear voices over distances engaging in urges toward action. "Prepare!" "Cry out!" "Make a road!" This section of Isaiah's prophecy has a very engaging feel. How are we invested in the process of the coming of the Messiah? What is your task? What is mine? How do we know when we are doing it, and who can help us assess the ongoing outcome? This is Advent in motion.

So, what is this Gift of Comfort that John was talking about. The clue is in the last verse, verse 8. John says, "I have baptized you with water; but he [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." No one had ever been offered that before. God was in the Temple or up in heaven. The general feeling was that while God was God, God didn't care enough about the everyday, ordinary sort of person or the things they were going through to be bothered. But John says, "You're wrong. And when Messiah comes, you'll see. Each and every one of you is as important to God as Moses or one of the Prophets. And Messiah, who we know was Jesus, will prove it through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's presence with you everywhere you go."

In our waking and sleeping, walking and talking. In all that we do, God is with us. And there is so much comfort in the fact that God cares for us that same way a parent cares for their child. We are not just another worker bee in the hive. We are uniquely created to be loved in a unique way by God our creator. And the coming of Christ Jesus proved that. That's why John was trying to get everybody cleaned up, from the inside out. This flesh and bone tenement that houses who we are, was getting ready to house a royal guest. If

John the Baptizer were standing here today, he'd ask the same question: "Are you ready?" So, we have to ask, "Are you ready?" Once you've received this Gift of Comfort, this gift that reminds you of your unique relationship with God, you're called to share it. I may be wrong, but I think God gives us the gifts we are given so we can share them with others. And when we share with others, we are instruments of Comfort. They realize they are not alone. That someone else cares. And that can make all the difference in the world. Let me share a couple of stories and you'll see what I mean.

Let me tell you about Lloyd. According to worldly standards, Lloyd was a nobody. He had no home and no place to go. Lloyd traveled around the country looking for work at harvest time and relied on the generosity and good graces of those he worked for. A certain couple invited Lloyd into their home and gave him a home-cooked dinner. Lloyd said very little as they ate. The wife, Nancy, offered to wash his clothes for him but Lloyd declined the offer. He picked cherries in the orchard next to their home that day and slept under the trees that gave him his livelihood. Early the next morning Lloyd returned to the couple who had shown him kindness. While he finished one last project in the orchard, Nancy, on an impulse, wrote him a letter telling of God's love. Then she tucked it with a little cash into a New Testament. She found his backpack in the yard, and stuck the packet inside. She imagined him traveling that day looking for work and at the end of the day bedding down somewhere under the stars, weary and all alone. She was warmed by the thought of Lloyd's surprise when he discovered her note, the New Testament and the cash she had planted in his backpack. This Christian couple never saw Lloyd again. But four years later, Lloyd's sister wrote to them, Lloyd had died. As Lloyd's sister was going through his few belongings she found the New Testament and the letter Nancy wrote telling of God's love. She concluded her letter by saying, "They must have been very dear to his heart, because he carried them with him until he died." It was such a simple thing, a note, a Bible and a little cash, but little things bring comfort and count for a lot in the kingdom of God.

And it got me to thinking about today's passage of Scripture about bringing comfort. The goal for the comforter is the same as what I saw in my mirror, to only see Jesus. When someone pauses to reflect on the care and kindness we've shown, or the ministry in which we've been involved, and then looks into the rearview mirror of their memory, all they should see is Jesus. Jesus being lived out in us. Jesus reaching out through us. Jesus caring for them through us. All they should see is Jesus. That's all John the Baptist saw.

And that's the way this season should be. It's a season of excitement and joy. But it's also a season of comfort. A season that reminds us we are not alone. That we are created in God's Image. And God loves us so much, that God sent His only son to be our Savior.

It's also the season to be like John the Baptist and Nancy. For unto us a Child is born who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit." That's the True Gift of Comfort given, not just during this season, but every single day. Amen.

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