

Advent 2, 10 December 2017

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Readings

Isaiah 40.1-5, 9-11;

Psalm 85.9-14;

2 Peter 3.8-14;

Mk 1.1-8

+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

Mark's Gospel begins with no introduction apart from the first line: 'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ'. There is no story of the angel announcing Christ's birth, no telling of Christ's birth or early life, nothing of what we call 'the infancy narratives' of Jesus. The Messiah, the anointed one, simply shows up on the scene. The Good News, the radical in-breaking of the gospel, the bracing impact of the God of the universe bursting into human life takes place in textual form on Mark's pages. The extreme shock of the incarnation is felt in Mark's opening words.

The only preparation, the only season of Advent we might say, is the camel wearing, locust eating wild man crying out in the wilderness, and then we immediately come to Jesus' baptism, the descending of the Spirit upon him, the voice of the Father bearing witness to him, and the opening of the heavens—here, in Jesus, the way to God is cleared.

And in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, not only the divine voice from heaven, but human voices bear witness to Christ's authority, and the voices of demons acknowledge him and tremble at his presence. Earth, hell, and heaven bear witness to this Advent.

This story, which Mark so casually introduces: 'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ', is not some sweet, gentle, bed-time reading; this is revolution. This is the story, the revolution, of one who has come to transform everything from the heights of the heavens, to the mundane dust of the earth, to the depths of hell. And we are

warned from the beginning: Wake up! Get ready! Prepare the way of the Lord. There is no escaping this worldwide and universal upheaval.

Advent is not a countdown to fluffy Christmas glee. This is Advent: preparation for an earth-shattering new world-order. All things are becoming new.

Isaiah makes this vividly clear: 'make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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' (vv3-4). Mountains filed down, valleys raised, the path is made straight by the complete upheaval and transformation and renewal of the whole world: the very geography of our lives is uprooted and reformed into a clear highway upon which God is found.

What does this mean? What does it look like for the very topography of our lives to be bulldozed and shaped anew to prepare the way of our salvation? Peter's letter sets what might seem like an odd destination as our aim: we are waiting on the Lord's coming because God does not wish anyone to perish 'but that all should *reach* repentance'. Repentance, an odd destination indeed. One that we are geared towards rejecting, not pursuing. But our readings suggest that repentance is actually something we are to be steering the entire infrastructure of our lives toward. Straighten out your road to reach . . . repentance?

Repentance, penitence, is set as our focus in Advent not because we are meant to drag ourselves through Advent towards Christmas in misery — moping to the manger, but because the glorious Advent of love that comes to us in the birth of our Saviour is truly such a glorious Advent because it comes with pardon. We are pardoned, we are forgiven, we are loved into the fullness of our hope. We are loved into new creation.

What a miraculous thing takes place when the God of the universe loves you with such a perfect love as to give a damn about your virtue. That God would even take notice of us and our puny, boring, lifeless sin, much less become sin for us and for our salvation, much less, as John says with wonder, baptize us with the Holy Spirit and make us new.

That God would be filled with such a love for us as to desire, as to take action to assure, that you and I would be filled with that love too. Extraordinary.

You see, deep down, I don't think we typically have a problem with judgement, with the idea of being sinners in need of repentance, in need of change, in need of the landscape of our lives to be uprooted and levelled out—we know we're not perfect. I think rather that we have difficulty with believing that we are worth being judged.

But the Advent of our Lord, the call to prepare the way for this Advent — to make straight our path in the desert — is a call to welcome a Saviour who locates each one of us as the desire of his love and mercy so that the call to prepare the way, to repent of sins, to transform our lives is a call of welcome into the waters of the Jordan to be bathed in pardon.

Heaven is open, the Spirit descends, and through Christ we hear the voice: 'This is my child', and a brand new world is ours to enter.

The life of preparing the world for its salvation, the life of welcoming our redeemer, is a life of repentance not because our repentance somehow changes God's mind about us, as if God was contingent upon our actions or our needs or our anything, but because our repentance changes us. Because God's love and pardon are always already on offer to us and repentance is a reorienting of ourselves to be humble enough, thankful enough, self-forgetful enough, to receive them.

This is, I think, particularly important for us during this time of Advent: all you can shop, all you can buy, all you can eat, in the *gallop* up to Christmas in our wealth-infused, white baby Jesus, consumer self-pleasuring Advent. The idea of self-denial sounds more than a little out of place when we are so self-engorged.

The offer on the table, that great gift of repentance into new life, is a gift into self-forgetfulness, a gift into love. Because our repentance is not and is never primarily about ourselves. It is about the salvation of the world.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptism makes us a people of God's promise, a people of hope. As Peter has it, 'according to God's promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (v13). In celebrating Advent, we are not just looking back and reenacting something that happened millennia ago - an empathetic, and perhaps pretentious, theatrical performance. This is not purely performative.

We are awaiting Christ's coming now, but we have the pledge of the promise, the hope that has already begun within us in the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are, as God's people have always been, a people of promise, a people of hope. But through the Spirit we are also the location, the space in the world where others come to know what hope looks like; come to see God's hope alive in the world.

The promise has come, hope has shown up, and *we* are the result. In Christ, we are the new creation. The Church is not just a new sort of community within the world. The Church is the new world. And as such the Church is always and to all an invitation.

So as we await the fulfilment of this new creation, where righteousness is at home, where justice and peace kiss each other, we who are pardoned, forgiven, loved into hope, must ourselves become an offering of hope to others. 'And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together' (Isaiah 40.5).