

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” These stark words from 2 Peter are not exactly what we would expect or want to hear as we wend our way toward Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus. Remember that last Sunday, which was the first Sunday in Advent, in the reading from Mark’s Gospel, it is Jesus himself who speaks in apocalyptic terms. He says, “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the ‘Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” Such solemn words are hopelessly out of tune with the headlong rush to Christmas cheer, the proliferation of idealized nativity scenes, and seasonal shopping frenzies. Instead of urging us on to even greater commercial or religious activity, these words serve to stop us in our tracks. We realize with a shock that the Christ who is the salvation of the world and who will come at the last in glory is the same infant Jesus, who is born a homeless human child, helpless and dependent. It is this Jesus Christ for whom we wait this Advent season. And as we wait, how can we ever prepare for such a one, knowing he comes to us both in humble Bethlehem birth and glorious at the end of the ages?

As we heard today, the Gospel of Mark opens with the statement, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” With this abrupt beginning, Mark catapults

us over the birth story and answers the question posed by his entire narrative----who *is* Jesus? Thus, we the readers, begin the story all ready knowing the salvific truth about Jesus that will unfold as he heals, tells confusing parables, dies on the cross, and rises.

In Mark's narrative, we immediately find ourselves face to face, not with angels or shepherds, but with John the baptizer in the wilderness. Roughly clad, he calls to mind the prophet Elijah. John is "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And people are flocking to him: "...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." John knows himself to be a messenger, not the Message himself, but rather one who cries in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. "He 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" We do not even meet Jesus in this passage---we will have to wait until the first Sunday after the Epiphany to hear how he is baptized by John and claimed by God as God's beloved Son. Immediately after that proclamation, Mark says the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, where he is tempted by Satan, before returning to Galilee and beginning his ministry.

In contrast to the terrifying vision of "the coming of the day of God" in 2 Peter, the words of today's Old Testament reading speak of God's consolation: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." God's message is addressed to the nation of Israel, mourning in exile after the Babylonian conquest. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Deutero-Isaiah’s herald proclaims, “See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He 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.” Here the image of God as mighty warrior is set alongside that of a gentle shepherd. Remember that tiny baby lying in a manger who is also the Christ coming as the heavens blaze and the elements melt with fire? How do we prepare for the Advent of such a God?

The author of 2 Peter is addressing people who are exhausted with preparing for Jesus’ coming in glory. The early church’s expectation was that Jesus’ return would be soon, and when that didn’t happen, it became an embarrassment. Some began to mock the delay of divine judgment and to deny the parousia because it did not occur during the first Christian generation. The author of 2 Peter admits the delay but refutes the denials, arguing that God’s time is not reckoned like our time: “Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” It is God’s mercy, not neglect or forgetfulness, that has delayed God’s judgment. But that judgment will surely come. In light of this assertion, the author asks: “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting

for and hastening the coming of the day of God because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire?"

The author of 2 Peter is asking the same question we might ask of ourselves as we live into this Advent season: Who are we to be as we wait? How do we prepare? 2 Peter offers this: "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation."

In this time of waiting, perhaps we too need to prepare by going out into the wilderness---into the wilderness that lies within ourselves---and repenting as did the Judean crowds. Wilderness as reflected in these and other scripture readings speaks of a place of struggle and change---and a place where amazing things happen: manna appears, a people is led to the promised land, a way of the Lord is prepared, valleys are lifted up and mountains made low, uneven ground becomes level and rough places a plain, a nation returns to Zion, a voice cries out for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

A contemporary theologian reflects that "if, as Mark seems to suggest, salvation comes from the wilderness, from the edges of life, then the darkness of Advent, the long dark nights, might be just what our souls need in order to contemplate changing our priorities and our practices. In the uncertainty of the wilderness, the quiet of darkness, away from the crowds, we can listen and wait for God's wisdom to emerge. The unstructured place, the endless desert, the place where we acknowledge how little we know---this is the place where we can begin to experience God's love and mercy..."

When we venture into the wilderness that is within each of us, seeking to prepare for the coming of Jesus who is also the Christ, we will encounter the Jesus Christ who is all ready present with us and who extends forgiveness and love even before we confess our

sins. We wait for the light of Christmas morning, yes, but we are waiting in the fullness of the knowledge that Christ has come, is coming, and will come again and again, to the end of the age.

