Mark 1:1-8

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

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
   who will prepare your way;   
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
   “Prepare the way of the Lord,  
   make his 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.’

Great Things Happen in the Wilderness

The usual images one has of the Advent season are what? A Christmas tree? The nativity scene? Angels singing to shepherds? A bright star? Joseph and Mary traveling to Jerusalem?

Today’s text, and the entire Gospel of Mark for that matter, has none of these images or events (and by the way, you’ll be hard pressed to find a Christmas tree anywhere in the Bible). Mark’s book has nothing about Jesus’ birth, infancy or childhood; it begins with a title: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Not a sentence, but a title. A news headline that is very good news indeed.

This news begins with a prophecy. Verse 3 is taken from today’s text from Isaiah: “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” The voice of the one crying in the wilderness is assumed to be voice of John the Baptist, who bursts onto the scene, in the wilderness, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (verse 4).

The texts from Isaiah and Mark lead us to question, *why the wilderness*? Why should God appear on the fringes of civilization, in the outback? It’s not exactly a great vacation spot. People don’t take vacations to the Mojave Desert or Antarctica very often. One teacher in Texas writes about some German exchange students who ask if there is any wilderness in the United States that they can visit. The teacher refers them to Big Bend National Park in western Texas, but warns them that *there’s nothing there,* to which the Germans respond that **that’s precisely the point: *there is nothing (no thing) there****.*

But according to Isaiah and Mark, the wilderness is precisely the place where God makes his presence known to us. Recall that it was “beyond the wilderness” where Moses witnessed God in a burning bush (Exodus 3). It was in the wilderness that the children of Israel spent 40 years being shaped into God’s people. It was in the wilderness where Elijah heard God’s voice whispering, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It was in the wilderness where all the people of Jerusalem and the Judean countryside were going to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was in the wilderness where Jesus would be tested by Satan and where Saul, persecutor extraordinaire, would spend some time becoming Paul, evangelist extraordinaire.

It’s also in the wilderness where the “outsiders” dwell – the lepers, the outcasts, the rejects, *precisely those people who some might consider to be rejected by God.* Yet here is the place where God makes his entrance, makes his way straight, where he comes to his people, people on the margins, on the sidelines. The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there. God's good news of grace announces God's presence on the fringe, God's love that goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, and God's promise that there is no place on earth God will not go or be for us.

Throughout the Biblical literature, God takes his servants aside, away from the corrupted society of vanity and glamour, to talk personally with them in a place where they can be alone together. I believe that one reason why I and so many other people love to walk on the beach is that we can look out over the ocean and see no thing but the ocean. Our mind is cleared of clutter, of our “to do” lists, of our day to day concerns. We can ponder the infinite. We can meet God in an uncluttered atmosphere. We can confront our demons with God’s support and consolation.

Mark says that this is the location of “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” People came to John in the wilderness because they recognized that there was something wrong in their lives, something wrong in their relationship with God. Something needed to be corrected. Their sin needed to be cleansed. Their own ways needed to be made straight. God was calling them home, to change, to correct, to repent, and to do this more than simply in their heads, in a private way; baptism was a public affirmation. It was an outward statement that they wanted to change, to be healed, and to be reborn in God. Now, going under water as a religious ritual doesn’t mean much if that’s all it is, but John makes it clear that he is using this act to point to something more – to the One who will come and baptize people with God’s Spirit.

Suddenly what he’s calling for is not just a new ritual or a new way of thinking; he’s inviting people to allow themselves to be completely remade from the inside out. He’s calling them to prepare for a change within them.

This is not just cosmetic, “New Year’s Resolution” change. This is a radical “God Within Us” change. This is the kind of change that makes us part of a different reality, a radically just, compassionate and gracious reality, that exists within the shell of this world, and that will ultimately replace it person by person from the inside out.

There is something compelling about a God who chooses to meet his people in places in places far and away from the hustle and bustle of ‘civilization.’ Throughout the Biblical literature, God takes folks aside, away from pretense and illusion to that place where we are alone together.

On this Second Sunday in Advent, we are reminded that hope awaits us in the wilderness, in the place where we are alone with God, stripped of all our false pride and arrogance. John the Baptizer is calling us to repent...and be forgiven. God is sending us His only Son to save us from sin and death. Make straight the way of the Lord! Joyfully anticipate His coming!