

Mark 1:1-8

1 The 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.’

Tears of Love

So you may be wondering, “Why are these lessons *not* about Jesus’ birth. Isn’t that what Advent is supposed to be about? An angel speaking to the virgin Mary, or stars in the sky, or prophecies about Jesus coming?” Isn’t Advent supposed to be about the coming of Christmas? Today’s Gospel reading has nothing at all to do with Jesus’ birth; in fact Jesus doesn’t even show up. So why have powers that be determined that this is the text for the Second Sunday of Advent?

Well, Advent means “arrival” and in our Christian tradition it really speaks of three different arrivals; the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, the arrival of Jesus in our hearts as an ongoing event – Jesus coming into the hearts of all believers, and the future arrival of Christ when he comes at the end of history. Today’s text, I believe, really speaks to the *ongoing* arrival of Jesus in our lives. I believe that most of you here have experienced that sort of Advent, the Christ coming into your life, and prior to his coming into your life, you had to prepare your heart for his Advent. In today’s reading we find that John the Baptist is helping people get ready for that Advent by preaching and baptizing; what he preached was a message of repentance for forgiveness of sin as a way of preparing their hearts for Jesus, who will not baptize with water but rather with the Holy Spirit.

The Advent of Jesus in our hearts is a very emotional event, because love is at the very core of it. I’d like to share a real life Advent story about God’s love working miracles in the lives of my Aunt Rose and my Grandfather, who I’ll call Grandpa Schaeffer. Grandpa Schaeffer died when I was only three years old, and so I have no recollection of him, and my father didn’t talk much about him – my father was the youngest of seven children and I think being the last of so many children, combined with the fact that Grandpa Schaeffer was a traveling salesman, and perhaps he wasn’t the nicest man in the world. My Uncle Ned never forgot how his dad had come to his school and publicly spanked him and in the process humiliating him – at age 99 that was the story my uncle shared with me about Grandpa Schaeffer. Clearly he was a man with flaws.

But it was the story Aunt Rose told me about him that most affected me. It was about Christmas, one Christmas during the Great Depression that their dad came home late after spending all day out trying to make some money in order to get his children Christmas presents, and had apparently failed. As I mentioned, Grandpa Schaeffer was a flawed man, and we don't know whether or not he had made some money and spent it on himself, if he had gambled or spent it on alcohol or not, but the bottom line was that he arrived home without any presents, and when his children began asking him if he had anything for them he began to cry.

I can say that as a man there are few things worse than disappointing your children on Christmas. It's the day you most want to bring joy into their lives, and that feeling that you've failed them cuts deep. But as sad as this homecoming might have seemed, I would point out that something very beautiful was happening. Grandpa Schaeffer came home. He didn't *have* to come home and cry, and not every father would have. He could have avoided the whole episode and just stayed out, hung out with friends until the morning. Or he could have come home, walked by his children without saying a word, gone to his bedroom and told his children not to bother him. He could have distanced himself. He could have made excuses. He could have blamed the children or scolded them. He could have hardened his heart, as the Bible often describes it. But he chose to come home; he chose to face his family. I don't think he *chose* to cry; we seldom *choose* on whether to cry or not; it just happens. Tears usually show a sincerity in the person who sheds them – a sorrow that can't be hidden.

I think there were more than a few tears shed by those who came to John the Baptist. These people who had made a choice to come to God. John had declared that the Messiah, God's own chosen son, was coming to them. And the people had a choice; they could respond by ignoring it, by not believing it or not caring about it. They could have stayed away from John and not listening to his message, or they could respond by coming to him, which really meant that they were coming back to God. And those Jews who came to John knew that God was a loving God, a rescuing God who had delivered their people from slavery and brought them into a land where they prospered. And they also knew that they had failed God on so many occasions. God had made it clear to his people that he expected them to love each other, and a failure to love others was a failure to obey God and therefore a failure to love God. Maybe some of them beat or humiliated their own children. Maybe they had ignored the cries of the needy. Maybe they had not welcomed strangers. Maybe some of them were just rude, mean people who didn't seem to like anyone but themselves and their own inner circle of friends. But somehow they believed what John was telling them; God's chosen was coming, and it's time to prepare yourself for that.

And just as Grandpa Schaeffer must have felt the shame and humility as he returned home to his children with no gifts that Christmas, so the Jews who came to John felt the shame and humility of returning to God having so many personal failures in their lives. It's a shame that inevitably brings us to tears. Back in the 1800s Methodists were famous for their camp meetings, which were revivals. The ministry was a lot like that of John the Baptist, but in this case they were proclaiming that Christ had indeed already come and died for their sins and had risen and was knocking at the door of their hearts wanting to come in and change their lives. And as the worship service reached its climax, there would be men and women in the congregation who would be crying, many because they were being convicted by God's Spirit, convicted of their sinfulness. And there would be things called wailing benches where these crying souls would sit

and wait for the preachers to lay their hand on them and pray them into salvation. Yes, tears of shame and humility, tears of love, are evidence of heart that truly wants to return home to God. They're the same kind of tears that Grandpa Schaeffer shed that Christmas Eve.

Grandpa Schaeffer didn't *fear* his wife and his children. Rather he loved them. The same was true for the children of Israel who heeded John's call to repentance. The same was true of the many people who responded to the call of the preacher during those camp meetings that used to go on hundreds of years ago. The same is true of us; we come to God with tears of shame and humility, but they are also tears of love. Because we *know* how much God loves us even as we fail to love others. We know how well he provides for us even as we fail to provide for others. We know just how much he forgives us even as we fail to forgive others.

And the baby Jesus, who came into this world on Christmas Day testifies to that love that's able to see beyond our selfishness and pride, and calls us to him regardless of who we are and where we are. That's why Christmas will always be about Jesus, because, as my Aunt Rose and Grandpa Schaeffer learned, there's no gift greater than love. My Aunt Rose will always remember that her father came home, not as a perfect man, but a man who truly loved his wife and his children. As we prepare for the arrival of Jesus, let us remember that love of God that withholds nothing from us, and let us respond with welcoming hearts.