

## Advent 2B. December 10, 2017. Mark 1:1-8.

This week I was in a conversation when a parishioner mentioned that he is having a hard time feeling the Christmas spirit this year. My initial brilliant pastoral insight was to ask whether it would help if it snowed. My second instinct was to encourage him to dive fully into the church's life this Advent, but then I thought for a moment about what we're actually reading here this month. Last week we began Advent with the end of the world and beginning today we're spending two weeks in the wilderness with a half-clothed oddball screaming at us to repent. It isn't until the fourth week of Advent that our readings take us to the cusp of something that might feel like the family gathered around the fire with Frosty the Snowman playing in the background. The liturgical season of Advent, with its own band of obscure fundamentalists behind it, each year quietly wages its own idiosyncratic war on cultural Christmas.

This parishioner's understated lament about the Christmas spirit came in a big group conversation and so we didn't pursue it too deeply. But I know enough about enough of you to be confident that this deeply faithful and habitually cheerful man is not alone this year. It's been a bad year. We are all of us swimming in the soup of anger, betrayal, and fear that dominates this cultural moment. And then when you add the inevitable private catastrophes that are more or less just a part of this rough and tumble life, you end up feeling completely out of sync with the holly jolly that we need to carry us through the relentless commercial cheer of this month.

I've been thinking about this feeling and trying to wrap some words around it. And while I do wish that we were all jollier, it occurs to me that we may in fact be, spiritually, exactly where the season of Advent wants us. The end of the world; the barren desert wilderness—these Advent themes resonate right now. We are in the wilderness. The wilderness is outside our comfort zones. It is threatening unfamiliarity. It is that state where we are separated from the props of our own security. It is not necessarily *more* dangerous than the city, but we don't know where the danger lies, which makes it feel omnipresent. The wilderness is the place between the rooms where we feel at home. It is the time in between the test and the results; the exit interview and the rediscovery of vocation; and, in Mark's gospel, it is the place where the good news begins.

In Mark, John the Baptist *appears* in the wilderness, without prologue. The good news begins out of nowhere, in the middle of nowhere. It comes in the wilderness, from a wild man. This matters very much for two reasons. First, when we're in the wilderness—when we're lost—we tend to find it very easy not to be at our best. We are perhaps scared and inclined to rush in any direction, because if we go far enough quickly enough we're bound at least to get somewhere, even if it's the wrong place. And we tend to become distracted by trying to recover all the aspects of ourselves that don't make for virtue: our own safety, our own prosperity, our own pleasure. We are not inclined to do what John the Baptizer actually calls us to do: to repent, to wait, to prepare, and to believe that salvation is coming.

And second, the good news first comes from a wild man, from a man we are not likely to listen to. Our familiarity with this story should not blunt the strangeness of this man, clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. He is a terrible church growth strategist: locating his ministry in an inconvenient area, preaching a hard and harsh message, taking little account for the experience of the newcomer, and

having a high threshold for membership—if you want to join, you have to risk your life letting this man push you under the river. He isn't cultured or educated, he probably has the incorrect view of the necessity of the Oxford comma. But what I'm trying to get at is that the most unlikely person carries the words of hope and comfort we and this world need. The wilderness is not a place without hope; it is a place of unsuspected hope, of hope that leaps out to surprise us from the last place we'd expect.

This surprising hope isn't easy, which in my mind makes it more trustworthy. It asks something of us. It asks us to listen to the people on the margins of our lives; to make ourselves vulnerable to those people not as objects of our charity but as partners who can tell us the truth about our lives. Which is just another way of saying that they can call us to repent. This hope calls us to do those impossible things: to repent, wait, and prepare even while we are in the wilderness. The hope is the assurance that God is coming, bringing our salvation.

If some of us are in the wilderness, feeling a bit lost, a lot worried, not entirely sure that we're safe, all this Christmas cheer is excruciating. And I think that John the Baptist suggests that even if we are not where we want to be, we may still be where we need to be. We are in the place where salvation begins. God is coming to us. Let us work to make his paths straight. Amen.