

A New Way Comes

Isaiah 40: 1-11 Mark 1: 1-8

Advent is a season of confusing signals. Our culture doesn't help at all.

Our culture celebrates Christmas, starting in retail sometime in October, and starting in earnest the day after Thanksgiving. That's because our culture has established Christmas as a shopping season, a time of gift giving, the display of strange symbols, obscure traditions, and any excuse for a celebration.

Consider how winter and Christmas go hand-in-hand, with dark and cloudy scenes of wintry landscapes covered in a half foot or more of snow. In the scriptures, there is no mention of a miraculous snowfall inundating Bethlehem. Evergreen trees are definitely not mentioned either in scripture, much less any tree decorated with lights or garland or angels or baubles. And no, there is no mention of gift giving, unless you count the story found only in Matthew of the wise men who arrived well after any birth.

The very thought of the birth of Jesus is absent from both Mark's and John's gospels; they have no interest in Jesus' birth. In Matthew we have a dark tale of intrigue that ends in a mass murder surrounding Jesus birth. We might want to have a memorial service for the child victims, but we don't. We turn instead to Luke who provides the only story of Jesus' birth that gets used these days. It is a nice story after all.

We are left asking the question about the other three gospels: why don't they have a good story about Jesus' birth like Luke? The answer is quite simple. They didn't have one and didn't care. They had no idea that we needed a story to go along with the evergreen trees and evergreen wreaths and the icicle lighting for homes in Florida and Arizona, and all the rest that our culture has built into the Christmas season.

The lack of Advent interest even extends to the church; yes, the church. Our hymnal has only three Advent hymns, only two of which get used. That's why we have so much insert music during Advent; we have to import it because there is so little in the hymnal. This musical deficiency is not unusual. In every hymnal I've encountered, there are dozens of Christmas hymns, far more than can be played on Christmas Eve or Christmas day, and only a handful of Advent pieces to be spread over several weeks.

Since our culture only celebrates Christmas and seems totally unaware of the season of Advent, we find Advent seems out of step with things. Admittedly, Advent *per se* doesn't even exist in scripture; it was contrived by the church. Still, while whiny types plead that we put 'Christ back in Christmas', no one in their right mind is calling for Advent to come before Christmas.

The end product is this nutty, happy season of shopping and decorating and eating that our culture calls Christmas. That's all there is – one long, nutty, happy season. It leaves us quite unprepared for the church and its Advent scriptures that don't seem to get it – like, where's the 'merry' in Advent's readings? – and those passages

have neither tinsel nor snow. It means that God's word is still ready to describe for us a new and different way from what has been trodden in the past, but only if we can separate ourselves long enough from culture Christmas to hear the radical message that is being presented.

Consider Isaiah 40 which is the starting point for what's called Second Isaiah, turning from the judgement oracles of First Isaiah prior to the Babylonian conquest, to the exhilarating and astonishing prospect of liberation from Babylon by God's chosen messiah, Cyrus, Emperor of Persia, who is freeing the exiles and returning them home. It is a time of new beginnings for God's people, and Second Isaiah beautifully portrays what this means.

The words opening Second Isaiah are meant to soothe and assure God's people about God's intentions. They, and their parents and grandparents, before them were casualties from God's absence and the destruction that came. *Comfort, comfort, my people ... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ... she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

Abandoned and left on the dung heap, in the city's anguish and despair at its devastation by Babylon, there was never any who would comfort her in her sadness, loss, and disgrace. She was alienated and scorned among the nations, abandoned by her God. Now God's words to all who would hear urge: *Comfort, comfort my people.*

Zion was sentenced and that sentence has been completed. It's time for something new, for God's people to make a new way toward justice and righteousness as God's kingdom has always expected from them.

They won't be able to accomplish this feat on their own. These people of God have been through the mill. Their return to the Promised Land is sponsored by the new empire on the block, the Persians. That's a huge blessing, but for this people to return to God, to navigate a way to faithfulness and determine a new life, is unreasonable.

A herald goes out among the people, summoning them into the desert, or at least calling them to pay attention to it. There in the rugged, hostile landscape, the road shall be formed, and the place transformed. God's people are told:

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.

The new way takes that old bitter journey – remember the years of desert wandering after the Exodus from Egypt – and makes that desert place where the new way will be shaped. It will be a new way of faith and practice, just as the ancients had learned their faith the hard way. God is coming again to be with God's people.

We can accept the metaphorical nature of the passage as a reference to the inner journey of faith for all of God's people. The landscape of our own spirit and inner life must be re-created to make an acceptable path for the coming presence of the Lord. God is coming again to be with God's people, with them and with us.

Then the voice cries out a second time, "Cry out!" And in confusion, another voice replies, "What shall I cry?" The answer from "the voice" is the reflective:

*All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

The contrast is drawn between the fickle and feeble nature of the faith commitment of God's people – yes, some things never change with God's people then and now – and the eternal and unwavering commitment of God for his people.

The herald is summoned nevertheless and told to *go up on a high mountain ... [to] bring good news to Jerusalem* and shout it loud and proud, fearlessly and faithfully declaring to the whole countryside, "*Here is your God! See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him.*" It's a very powerful image with the strong arm of the warrior leading the way. Except then it ends in the tender words of nurture. *He tends 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.* Two very different images emerge of this conquering God; strident and forceful against others, yet a caregiver to the weak and vulnerable. [The same kind of dual expression occurs in Deut. 1:30-31.]

God is coming, and a new way is coming for God's people. Whatever you knew and whatever you expected before, God is making a new way. You need to make ready for this new way, preparing hearts and minds and spirits to be made new in faith and purpose.

John the Baptist is also all about a new way.

And let's be clear: John the Baptist is about the most un-Christmasy thing about Advent. No one thinks of Christmas and then John the Baptist being anywhere in the Christmas picture. Think of the John the Baptist Christmas card you couldn't find. I went to Amazon and searched for a John the Baptist Christmas tree ornament. One company actually manufactures a variety of them, but of course, they're all images set on a snowflake. Of course.

This passage is the beginning of the gospel of Mark, the oldest of the gospels, and it has no nativity story at all. It starts by drawing from Isaiah 40, the section about the herald in the desert. It goes on to describe the ministry of John the Baptist who was *preaching [about] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

In preparing the people for the coming of the Lord, which John anticipated imminently, he sought to put them in a right relationship with their God. For John, this required a new way that departed from tradition.

Tradition would put God's people seeking to address their sinfulness through the temple and observing the priestly code. John stands apart from tradition. That's pretty obvious since he's nowhere near Jerusalem. If he tried doing that baptism thing in Jerusalem, he'd be in prison in the blink of an eye. He isn't out amid the Jordan River wilderness because of the scenery. He's hoping to stay under the radar of the ruling powers.

John stood outside the religious establishment as his personal description makes very clear. Reminiscent of the great prophet Elijah, the prophet who was expected to return as the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist is dressed in camel's hair clothing and eating locusts and wild honey. John was decidedly *not* a priest, *not* a Pharisee, *not* a Sadducee. He was unique, a prophet of the Lord. By placing himself outside the great city, away from the Temple, and apart from the religious elders, he declares the new thing that God is doing.

John passionately believed that God is coming once again to his people. But when God comes, people will be judged as God initiates a reign of justice and righteousness. 'Prepare for his coming and make your own ways straight and true,' John said.

John also talks about the one who comes after him, the one who is **of** the Lord, not simply **called by** the Lord, like John himself. That is the Promised One of God, greater than John, leading the way to the coming Kingdom of God's reign. In preparation for the One who is coming, John baptizes with water, but this Promised One of God will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Even John the Baptist knows that his new way is only temporary. The present age is coming to a close and God's new era of the promised One is coming in its place. If John's is a new way, it will be eclipsed by yet another new way, the way of the Spirit. God's new life promise is coming again to God's people.

Let our preparations during this season move beyond the usual tradition of distractions and irrelevancies. Our lessons remind us that this is a spiritual season of renewal, for preparing our hearts and minds and spirits for the new way being brought by the Promised One of God. May each of us be prepared to be led in God's new direction, for God shows the way to his promise of new life for you.