

The Voice
Jennie Clark
Mark 1: 1-8

The second week of Advent is the week we hear “the voice”, the voice of one crying in the wilderness- *“Prepare the way of the Lord”*. Mark’s gospel begins abruptly. It doesn’t open with a story of Jesus’ birth, but with John the Baptist echoing the words of Isaiah, announcing that the promise of God’s salvation is fulfilled.

As we merrily prepare for Christmas, carefully arranging our nativity sets, John the Baptist crashes onto the scene like a snowball thrown through the window. He’s odd. He’s noisy. He’s unnerving. His appearance and message seem dissonant with this season that many say is *“the most wonderful time of the year”*. This is the season when we expect to receive cards with warm fuzzy messages of “Merry Christmas” or “Peace on Earth”, not ones that say: *“Repent and be baptized”!*

Here we are barreling towards Christmas and this eccentric prophet sets up flares in the middle of the road we’re on, saying turn around. Like the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist speaks of the One who God sends to usher in God’s kingdom. John shouts to those who will listen: *“Get ready! There’s a shift in the universe. God’s promise of salvation spoken through Isaiah and the prophets is now fulfilled.”*

Like an announcer on stage before the curtains are parted, John proclaims that *“a new day is dawning.”* The One who stands before and beyond time, now enters time with us in Jesus Christ- making all things new. What made sense in the old order will not stand in the new. The rich will be made poor. And the poor will be made rich. The powerful will be brought low. The lowly will be lifted up. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the wisdom and values of this world are turned upside down.

John calls us to a new way of thinking, of seeing, of being in the world that belongs to God. He calls us to a radically different way of being “religious”, of being the church. He calls us to the way of the One who comes and who is coming, Jesus Christ. The new way is expressed in the realities of sharing coats and food, of dealing fairly and honestly with others, of treating everyone, even enemies with respect and dignity.

The repentance and baptism that John calls us to is more than a ritual. It’s a cleansing and recalibrating for people like us who are caught up in our own messes and in sinful systems. It’s a warning that we’re heading away from God if we continue in the direction we’re going, turning a blind eye to the pain of our neighbors and to unjust systems that burden them.

The voice in the wilderness cries to us: *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”* Lift up your heads. Open your ears, your eyes, your minds and your hearts. Turn around! Change course . . . in your thinking; in your living; in your desires; in your priorities; in your values; in your expectations; in your need for control. The train you’re riding is on the wrong track.

After the first semester of my college freshman year in Western Pennsylvania, I was excited to go home for Christmas. I looked forward to: re-connecting to family and friends, sleeping in my own bed, and participating in our family Christmas traditions. There’s nothing sweeter than coming home for Christmas your freshman year.

A college friend and I got a ride with a classmate as far as the train station in Lancaster PA. From there our plan was to take the train to Paoli, where my friend’s father would pick us up and take us the rest of the way home to Broomall. Well that was the plan . . .

As we pulled into the train stop, the conductor walked down the aisle saying, “Paoli - Next stop- 10 minutes!” And that’s when the second-guessing started. *“This sure looks like the Paoli station . . . Yeah, but he said Paoli was the next stop in ten minutes . . . ?”* We stayed on the train.

As we pulled away from the station, we had a sinking feeling that we’d made a huge mistake. When the conductor walked by again he confirmed our fears. Yes, that was Paoli station.

He told us the next stop was 30th St. station in Philadelphia, which was unfamiliar to both of us. My friend was familiar with the Penn Center Station and she asked the conductor if the train stopped there, which he told us it did. So when we got to 30th street station we once again stayed on the train, planning to get off at Penn Center.

We waited for what seemed a long time to reach Penn Center. As we watched the scenery out our window go from inner city to residential suburb, we suspected we might be in trouble.

We asked the conductor again if the train was stopping at Penn Center station. And he affirmed that yes, it was stopping at Penn Center station . . . in New York City! We got off at the next stop in Trenton.

By that time it was the height of rush hour and sketchy looking characters were lurking around the pay phone we needed to use. After some frantic phone calls to our parents we boarded a different train, heading in the opposite direction that took us back to 30th St. station where we got off and fell into the arms of her father who was waiting to take us home.

In this second week of Advent the voice of the prophet beckons us to turn around, to get on a different track, to head in a different direction if we want to get home. He stands there waving frantically, calling us to change course from broken systems and from

unexamined lives that leads us astray. He calls us to turn around and fall into the arms of the One who comes for us.

CONCLUSION:

John the Baptist has an important part to play in the unfolding of God's kingdom. He knows his role in God's purposes for the world is to point to Jesus and he does it well. He also knows he is subordinate to Jesus.

Like John we too have a role to play in the unfolding of God's purposes for the world through Jesus Christ. "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" is the way Mark's gospel opens.

The coming of Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to deliver us. But Mark suggests that it's only the beginning of the good news. The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God continues to carry on through Christ's followers.

Last week there was a prayerful and powerful prophetic witness made by Christians who were arrested in the Senate by Capitol Police as they read aloud from their Bibles about how God instructs us to treat the poor and vulnerable. Like John the Baptist they called senators to change course from implementing tax reforms that could negatively impact the lives of the most vulnerable. They were preparing the way of the Lord.

Two weeks ago at Westminster we opened our doors to host and sheltered families experiencing homelessness for a week. In addition we collected coats, socks, turkeys and toys to share with our neighbors in need. We were preparing the way of the Lord as well. The "Be the Church" banner at the entrance to Westminster's driveway is a witness and a reminder of our role in preparing the way of the Lord, in serving God's purposes in the world.

As we do this, let us tune our ears to the voice of the One born in Bethlehem, the One who calls us by name to follow him, to be his disciples. In the coming days of Advent try to listen deeply beyond the frenzy of the season, beyond chaotic and disturbing reports of scandals and disasters, and beyond the worries and fears that can paralyze us, for the voice of our Lord, Jesus Christ that offers comfort in anxious times saying: "*Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.*"

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