

**WHEREVER THE WAY MAY LEAD US  
ADVENT 2, YEAR B  
MARK 1:1-8**

**12 17 2023**

Our Gospel text this morning is from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. You'll notice, there is no Christmas story in Mark. No angels whispering in Mary's ear. No shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. No wise men from the East following a star. No big-eyed animals standing around a straw-stuffed manger. No baby Jesus.

Mark either did not know about those things or else he did not care about them. No Christmas story to begin his gospel.

For Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ begins way out in the wilderness of Judea with an old-timey prophet named John.

Mark's gospel should be a movie, it is so cinematic and dramatic. First, a long panoramic shot of the desert east of Jerusalem. Row up on row of buckskin-colored hills with nothing on them but rock and sand and silence. Then the title of the movie appears on the screen, just the way we heard it a moment ago in our reading: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It is a long title, but they'll have plenty of room for it on the screen with all that desert.

Then you hear a voiceover as the camera continues to scan the hills. "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah," the voice says. "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way."

Then people begin to appear on screen, walking toward something you cannot see just yet. The camera comes to the end of a big crowd and pushes into it, straining for a better view of what is going on up front.

The narrator continues: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight."

And just then, the camera breaks through the crowd to reveal a strange looking man at the center of the commotion. He is standing in the Jordan River, water up to his shins. There is a soaked wet person shivering, standing beside him.

The camera focuses on this main man and he does not look like anyone else around him. As different as the people are from one another, the others at least look like they come from the same century. The man they have come to see standing in the water looks like a cave man.

He is dressed in camel's hair with a big leather belt. It is the same exact outfit Elijah wore eight hundred years before him. His hair and beard look like they have never been cut. He is as wiry as a fence post.

Surely his appearance is a statement of some kind. Those of us in the movie theater, watching this, we may not be able to interpret it very well, but those people standing around him certainly could. This man was a messenger, predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, sent by God. A prophet in the old classic style.

Maybe that is why the people flocked to see him. I cannot figure it out. Everything I know about John makes me think I would have gone out of my way NOT to encounter him. He sounds just like those street preachers who wave their Bibles at you and shout at you that you are going straight to hell if you do not repent right now. (Of course, they are the only ones who know how you are supposed to do that and whether or not you have passed the test.)

But there is a big difference between our modern street preachers and John.

Self-appointed prophets tend to plant themselves right in your way, so you have to cross to the other side of the street to avoid them. They get in your face and dare you to ignore them. Whereas John planted himself out in the middle of nowhere. He set up shop in the wilderness.

Anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say had to go to a lot of trouble to get there. Borrowing the neighbor's donkey or setting off on foot with enough food and water for the journey down lonely trails and canyons infested with bandits.

We wonder why someone would do such a thing as that, especially someone from Jerusalem, which was where the temple was and the rabbis and all the accumulated wisdom of the religious establishment. If someone wanted to hear from God, why not stay right there, maybe attend some extra services or make an appointment with one of the chief priests? Anyone who would turn away from all that and set off for the wilderness was looking for something else, something more, something the temple could not provide.

John had it, apparently. He was frightening, all right. And confrontational. He was uncivilized. He was from another time and another planet.

But he drew people out to see him. He spoke about One who was coming as if he was repeating what God was saying to him right at that moment, one sentence at a time.

John did not have many details. He did not know the name of the One who was coming, for instance. He did not say what he looked like. But John knew that the world was about to end and a new world was spinning toward him, carried in the arms of God's chosen One.

Dressed in animal hair with a piece of tanned hide around his waist, his breath heavy with locusts and wild honey, John proclaimed that someone was coming. Someone so spectacular that it was not enough to simply hang around waiting for him to arrive. It was time to get ready. To prepare the way, so that when he came, he could walk a straight path right to their doors.

Gospel stories always begin with a messenger. Whether it is an angel whispering in Mary's ear or a parent telling a child a story or a skinny prophet standing in a river. What strikes me about this messenger, this John the Baptizer, is that he was nowhere near a temple. Those who insisted on staying inside the temple never heard his message. Only those who were willing to enter the wilderness got to taste his freedom. And many of them were still there when that spectacular Someone finally did arrive, far from the civilized center of town.

I suppose every one of us has some idea where our own wilderness lies, as well as a long list of good reasons why we should not go out there. We are comfortable here, after all. We know the ropes and we know how we will be fed. Why should we hunt for God anywhere else?

I cannot image, unless it is that voice crying out in the wilderness, the one you cannot quite make out from here. If we only listen for God in church, we will miss half of the message. The good news is always beginning out there, somewhere in the world, for those with ears to hear and hearts to go wherever the way may lead us.