

Sermon Title: *Some Preparation Required*

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.’

Isaiah 40:1-5

¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ 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.

⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’

Focus statement: We long to be comforted, we long for change. Moving from uncertainty and fear, we call upon God to make things ready—the mountains leveled, the paths made straight, our hearts prepared.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...

This is how the gospel of Mark begins, not the end or the completion of the good news, but the beginning of the good news.

But for us, sitting here almost 2,000 years after these words were first written down – it is not really *news* to us anymore – we have heard these words and stories many times before – most of us here could give the outline of the story of Jesus' birth and life. And so for us, it is not really news as much as *memory*.

At times like Advent, we try to make it news once again – we try different ways of preparing and waiting – we light candles and make wreaths and retell the stories of Jesus' birth, beginning with prophecies made hundreds of years before his arrival in Bethlehem – all in hopes that the story might feel like news once again; that some might be renewed in hope, in love, in peace – that we might renewed in expectation and imagination – that we might be surprised again by what God has done and by what God is doing.

But it is hard, especially for people who have spent much of their life in or near the church, it is hard to hear these stories anew, it is hard to receive any stories of Jesus as more than memory.

Though, I would guess that we have all had people in our lives who have helped us to receive the story freshly again – people who have opened us up to God in new ways; people who say things in a new way that we are able to hear them anew, as if for the first time; people who put into words what we have been thinking or feeling, but unable to articulate – and it feels like news again. People who show us a way – who invite us into participate in something with them – and it feels like good news again, like we are hearing or experience the message of Jesus for the first time. Like the first time I read Herbert McCabe saying the words, “the God of the Universe is Simply in love with you” – this was news to me. Or when I met Father Jacque in Iraq, telling of his response to his ISIS captures, that he looked at them with love and remembered, that they too are victims of this war – his response made Jesus’ words news to me again.

Catholic author Brian Doyle talks about trying to help the story of Jesus be news for his junior high Sunday School class¹. “It was”, Doyle says, “just before Christmas, when I asked them to rename Jesus.” Now, renaming Jesus might seem a little radical and out there, but Doyle thought, “His name is getting in the way. We are taking him for granted. He’s a brand name, an adjective, a label, a myth, a legend. So we will give Jesus a new name and maybe wake him up in our hearts & lives a bit.” And so he asked his class for some suggestions on a new name of God incarnate, for the Son of God, for love made flesh. And the ideas that came in were not anything like “Prince of Peace”:

Pi was the first suggestion for a new name for Jesus, followed by T.Rex., and Spyro.

The Dude, Iggy, and Tank, also were nominated.

¹ Brian Doyle’s chapter, “Mister Louie” in his book *Revelations and Epiphanies*

And finally Q, Corky, and Mister Louie were added as options.

They decided to try these names out for awhile as they read and discussed together, trying to find which fit Jesus best. ‘Corky Christ’ got some votes for the alliteration, and ‘Iggy Christ’ apparently sounded pretty good, although it sounds a bit like a pop-star to me. And ‘Bobby Christ’, thought Doyle, sounded too much like a stock car racer.

Eventually, after trying out the different names, it was ‘Mister Louie’ won out – ‘Mister Louie’ for the name of the human incarnation of the Lord of the Cosmos – interchangeably with Jesus, and *Yesuah ben Joseph* (his name in Aramaic).

And, reports Doyle, it worked pretty well. “My students spend a lot more time thinking about the peculiarities of Mister Louie’s predicament than they did when his name was the same name that people use when they lose their tempers.

And so, they talked about Mister Louie’s clothes and family and schooling. Another time they talked about how Mister Louie might have felt when he healed a blind man with spit and dirt, and what it might have been like for him to pray desperately for a young dead girl to be alive once again. And they talked about how you could ask Mister Louie for help when you were crying or scared or angry.

“This thin man who changed the world forever and left the most stunning story behind him is a little more real now to these curious children than he was before when we only called him Jesus.”

By this creative act of calling Jesus “Mr. Louie”, the stories of God working in and through Jesus became “news” once again, rather than just memory.

One sign that the stories of Jesus have become more memory than news, I think, is how we generally think of John the Baptist as being the real “out there” and radical one – compared to John, Jesus seems pretty tame – he lived in a home, not in the wilderness; Jesus chose bread and wine over locusts and wild honey. So, I guess in these ways it is understandable that Jesus would seem more tame in comparison to John in his camel hair coat. Though, I think this says much less about Jesus and John than it does about the way we have tamed and domesticated the story of Jesus – the ways that the years have turned the life and message of Jesus more into memory than news. Jesus is sweet and lives in our hearts – John is wild and lives in the wilderness eating locusts and honey. But both were executed at the hands of the state: John for speaking truth to power. And, of course Jesus, who was executed for being a threat to the state – who so threatened the status quo and the elite of his day that he was put to death – hardly a tame figure who lives only in our hearts.

Notice that Mark does not begin his Gospel account not simply by saying “The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” but rather “The *beginning* of the good news....” It’s so easy to be taken off guard by the brevity, even abruptness of Mark’s opening line – no angels and shepherds here, no genealogies or poetic hymns to God’s eternal Word – it is so brief that often we overlook it altogether. I learned this week that many scholars actually believe this was the author’s intended title for his work, rather than its opening line – so rather than the “Gospel According to Mark”, the author wanted you to look up in the index and see “The Beginning of the Good News

of Jesus Christ, Son of God.” Or, how we might call in now, “The Beginning of the Good news of Mister Louie, Son of God.”

Being the title, we must assume that Mark is trying to tell us something, both by the simplicity and open-ended quality of his title/ opening line. Perhaps part of what Mark is suggesting is that this whole story about Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist and running through the calling of his disciples, exercising demons, healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and culminating in his death and the declaration of his resurrection (the death and declaration of Mister Louie’s resurrection)...is all *just the beginning*. The story of the good news of Jesus Christ, that is, continues to this day.²

Perhaps we might hear this as news this morning – the news that God is not done. That God’s project of cosmic reconciliation is still in process, that we are not yet the fullness of what we have been called to be – that the whole of the story of Jesus is just the beginning of the good news and the story goes on. In you. In me. All over the world where the story of John the Baptist is being retold this morning Christians are trying to prepare themselves to hear the Christmas story as news again, not just nostalgically but actively. This part of the story reminds us that Mister Louie and his message of the kingdom of God was so radical that people had to get prepared for it – that they needed ground work laid for them, that they needed to be opened-up by a wild prophet in the wilderness –they needed John to help them be able to hear and receive and internalize all that Mister Louie was bringing. That the kingdom of God is so antithetical to

² David Lose presents this idea in his ‘Working Preacher’ post, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/12/advent-2-b-just-the-beginning/>

the kingdom of the world that only after meeting a crazed prophet in the wilderness, only then were people maybe able to recognize a bit of this new thing that God was doing among them.

And it is not just John who is called to cry out and prepare the way. It's all of us. Right here, right now. We are all being called to help people again hear and experience this story of God's love incarnate as news once again – that through our lives of love, of justice; through our words of mercy and understanding and forgiveness; through our ears that listen with deep compassion and empathy; through our hands that serve and massage the wounded places; through our voices that speak both love and truth; through our creative imagination that venture so far as to even call Jesus by a new name – in all these ways and more we are called to prepare people to hear this as news once again; to live lives that might help open people up just a bit more to the sacred story that had its beginning in Bethlehem, but whose conclusion is still to be written.

How are you being invited into the story? To make it news once again?

- Perhaps it is by refusing to speak ill of anyone during the Christmas season, be it politician, someone you work with, or Ebenezer Scrooge.
- It might be that card or letter or phone call you have put off making or sending
- Perhaps it will be that you will not avoid talking about things that matter to you around the Christmas table, so instead of avoiding topics of love and justice, you will instead engage them in open and loving ways
- Maybe it will be in how you spend and don't spend your money for Christmas

- In the craziness of American Christmas, it might be lighting a candle everyday to remind you that God's love broke into our world.
- Or it might even be so far as calling Jesus by a new name

However we are hearing the nudging of God's Spirit, let us with Mary actively join with God, saying "let it be with us, according to your word." That the Spirit of the living God might dwell in our womb – that our lives speak of news still breaking into our world, still shaping, still transforming. Amen.