

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the one who **is** to come.

Today and next Sunday we have the story of John, Jesus' cousin, from two different gospel writers. Today is Mark's version of John who is a prophet living in the wilderness, decidedly most like Elijah, a famed Old Testament prophet. So, what do prophets do? Well, I submit that in our culture and society today, we think of prophets as fortune-tellers and predictors of the future. But once again, what is so often **our** connotation and view of ideas and words today that are not the same, or even sometimes remotely similar to, the ancient use and meaning of those same words and ideas. In the olden days of the Old Testament, prophets were simply messengers or truth-tellers. They were predictors of what is to come **only** in terms of how it, the future, is driven by or related to one's present behavior. The prophets of old analyzed and told the truth of the "**now**" for the sake of moving toward a **different** future. Have you ever thought about truth-tellers? Are they essential but not often very popular. Telling someone the truth or being told the truth is really an exercise of looking into a mirror. We are **forced** to see what we would rather not see, or have chosen to disregard, or even pretend we are not.

Before we look more at the substance of Mark's John, I would like to take a very brief look at our Isaiah reading today. Do you know what cantatas are? Have you heard cantatas? Have you ever sung in a cantata? I can remember when cantatas were really the big thing in churches. So, one of my favorite Christmas songs, it is not a carol, is called "Every Valley shall be Filled." It was written by John W Peterson and is part of one of the many cantatas he wrote. It is modeled on the Gospel of Luke's rendition of verses 3 and 4 in our Isaiah reading today that say: "**A voice cries out: '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.'**" I have acquired the music for this song several times but I have absolutely no idea where it might be today, if we still even have it. I still, however, love to sing my own remembered version of it.

I have actually seen our modern version of our Isaiah text played out in Canada over the course of many years. The ALCAN highway was built quickly under very extreme conditions during World War II. The builders used the easiest route possible and then there were years of semi-improvement. In the 90s a conscious effort to significantly improve the road for efficiency sake was begun. This included the straightening of the road by diagonally cutting through curves and leveling the road by reducing hills and filling in low spots or valleys. If one knows what and where to look, one can see remnants of the old road. Our lives are often filled with curves, hills and valleys that God can straighten for us.

In Mark, John is described as John the Baptist, and is clearly portrayed as not just a prophet but specifically as the great prophet Elijah. Elijah's return would signal the coming of the Messiah. Like the prophet Elijah, John the Baptist resided in the wilderness, wore clothes similar to Elijah's and had a similar diet as well.

So, maybe it is important for us today to consider the truth of the gospels, God, Jesus, and the incarnation. God's **choice** to become human means that God really **committed** God's self to everything that it means to be human. From our Isaiah reading today, God decided to experience joy as well as desperate need for comfort. From our Psalm today, God chose anxiety alongside the radical presence of peace. From our reading in 2 Peter, God also accepts the possibility of postponement and delay as well as the security of promise. If God is willing to enter into these dichotomies associated with our humanness, should not we as well?

Jesus entered into the entirety of our humanness, our sin. Not, however, our **personal** sin of depravity, questionable morality, unworthiness, and so on. Jesus enters into the powers that perpetuate sin, the nations that nurture sin, and the structures that situate sin as justifiable. Jesus came to take on these powers, these sins by telling the truth – by being the truth. Jesus both experienced and challenges our own compliance, our own conformity, our own acquiescence to the kind of sin that **tolerates** inequity and **believes** we have gotten past or moved on beyond the -isms that exclude and excuse, and institutional ideologies that rationalize acts of dehumanization.

How do we respond to this Jesus? This God? Well, for starters, we listen and obey their commandments – namely love God and love others. And then we believe and trust their promises. Did you know that promises are **not** static. They cannot be. Promises – if you hear and believe them – create expectations about the future which set **something** in motion. In fact, some theologians say that the Gospel of Mark describes Jesus - as one on the move. Perhaps even Jesus is tired of waiting. And so, **promises** are like water, they have to remain in motion or else they become stagnant and lose their identity as either promises or water. And this is true about God's promises, and maybe even more so. And maybe that is the key message of Advent. In the stable at Bethlehem God was not only keeping promises God made to Israel but **also** making promises to us. God, in Jesus, hears our cries of fear and concern and doubt at our lowest points and responds. God knows and does this because God, in Jesus, has already been anywhere we can go – no matter how depressing.

The Gospel of Mark begins with the words: "**The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.**" And, where did it begin? In the middle of nowhere. In a stable in a little town. Not in the center of power. Not in Jerusalem. Not where the theological leaders gathered. It began unknown in the outskirts, the unexpected places, in the spaces where boundaries **needing** to be torn down were already **crossed**. That, my friends, is the **exact** opposite of our culture, our society. So, today, where do you want to be?

Hear then the good news:

Mark says his gospel is the beginning of the Good News.

That means that everything Mark has to say about Jesus is only the beginning.

All the exorcising, healing, preaching, and teaching is only the beginning.

Even Jesus' death and resurrection is only the beginning.

The Gospel of Mark then concludes with an open-ending. Why? Because it is only the beginning.

The story is not over which means we are **all invited** to add to the story.

Are you doing that?

Do you want to do that?

What kind of waiting are you going to do?

Are you just going to sit around waiting for Christmas? Or Christ's return for that matter?

Or are you going to get in the game? Spending your time, energy, wealth and lives making a difference **right** now.

If the Stewardship Campaign is an indicator, I would say that you have chosen to get in the game.

Just so you know – we will not bring ultimate healing or comfort or peace or justice.

That, my friends, is God's job. And God **will** keep God's **promises** to the fullest in the fullness of time.

God is all in. Are you all in?

Grace and peace to you, my friends. May you be all in the game alongside God.

Amen