

## Those Who Dream...Prepare the Way

Today we begin at the very beginning of the earliest gospel account. We find ourselves in Mark, chapter 1, verses 1-8. Listen for God's word to you this day:

The beginning of the good news<sup>[a]</sup> of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,<sup>[c]</sup>

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,<sup>[d]</sup>

who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,'"

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared<sup>[e]</sup> in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And 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.

<sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He 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. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with<sup>[f]</sup> water; but he will baptize you with<sup>[g]</sup> the Holy Spirit."

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

## Prepare the way...

Have you ever been so awe struck by someone or something that you stopped in your tracks and literally changed the path of your life? Maybe it was the dream of something that could be or it was a call of the Holy Spirit directing you to make a life change that you never could have seen coming, or maybe that you never would have chosen for yourself. Each year the season of Advent offers us the opportunity to reflect on those moments, to be reminded of the ways in which God is calling us to a life that may look different than what we thought, is leading us down a path that we never saw for ourselves. A path that has been both prepared for us and asks of us: will you prepare the way? It is in a sense a realigning of ourselves onto proper paths.

This highlighting or realigning of paths happens frequently around birth and death. Those welcoming a child into the world, often have a shift in their priorities when the child arrives. And then again with death we find that our focal points change, demands for our time and energy shift our priorities as our loved ones face the last moments of life.

This has become the same with our faith. We focus a large amount of our energy on the birth of Jesus the Christ child into the world and then on his death. In particular, we focus on what it all means to us, what we get out of it. But, the very first written account of Jesus, told to us through the words of John the Baptist, tells us about how the one coming, Jesus, will transform our life, not because we will be rewarded but because we will be called to prepare the way, just as John the Baptist has done. Are you ready to prepare the way?

So while the times of birth and death seem to get most of our attention it is in the middle times, or the ordinary season we call it in the church, that we lose sight of the need to prepare the way, but that is the very place that John shows up today, in the middle of the everyday lives of those who gather around him to hear not about the birth of a baby, but of the man whose ministry is about to change their lives, the man who is preaching about God in radical ways, the one for whom he is preparing the way.

John and Jesus lived in a society that is not much different than ours, full of egos and self-boasting, full of power grabs and ruthless violence, full of fear and longing. It's not much different 2000 years later because we have too often focused on the moments of birth and death of Jesus, and not on his life, not on living out the message for which he was born and died.

The first place the gospels take us is into the wilderness. To a place that will require us to use our wits, to keep awake, to set out on what is likely to be a lonely path, a place that may even stop us in our tracks and change our paths, maybe even onto a path that is not yet fully forged, but invites us to do some of the forging, heading toward Christ.

We are invited, by God, by John, and by Jesus throughout the gospel accounts to prepare the way, to latch onto Jesus' dream for this world, which is in fact God's dream for this world, for us, and to bring it to fruition. Even in the face of all the doubters and nay-sayers. Prepare the way!

I have been watching a number of shows lately that talk about the use and abuse of natural resources. My favorite is Sir David Attenborough's documentary, A Life on Our Planet. In this documentary he looks back on his life of exploring this planet and all the greatness which it holds. He shows the ways we humans have caused harm to the planet, to animals, to other humans, to plant life, to the air, to the water... quite frankly the first half is very depressing and I wanted to turn it off. But, we kept watching and I'm thankful we did, because he offers a word of hope at the end.

He offers us a glimpse of what it looks like when against all odds, in the middle of the everyday ordinary life, resurrection happens. When life springs from the places that have been written off as dead and unredeemable. And he is clear, it is our responsibility, as the ones who have caused so much of this damage to make changes now, immediately, individually and collectively. He knows waiting around for changes to be mandated will only lead to more destruction, more death, and little hope. In the ordinary life a sudden stop is required, a shift to a new path is calling us. Prepare the way!

The Roman Empire had no vision for creating a world that was better for all of it's inhabitants. They weren't and are not the only ones. Those dreams have always been left to the prophets. The prophets, including John, prepare the way for dreams that don't reflect a world of destruction, but offer glimpses of peace and hope where it seems as though life has been lost forever. People like Sir David Attenborough show us how dreaming of a world that is cared for through mutual respect makes the world more whole, and more holy. Prepare the way!

My favorite Christmas movie is Elf. In Elf, we meet Buddy, a human raised by Santa and the north pole elves who when learns that he is human wants to go meet his father in NYC. So he sets off only to be met with skepticism and disdain from all those he encounters, including his long lost father who because of his rotten attitude has been on the naughty list. No one believes Buddy is an elf from the North Pole, nor do they believe he knows Santa.

In spite of the stares of disbelief, and proclamations of disbelief he continuously goes into the wilderness of NYC singing and sharing stories about Santa, telling everyone about how joyful the Christmas season really is, in the face of the nay-sayers and doubters, he is joyous, staying true to who he is and who he is called to be, and by the end of the movie it is the renewed belief in Santa across all of NYC that allows Santa's sleigh to fly. Those who prepare the way point to something beyond themselves. Prepare the way!

Whether a movie character, a natural historian, a preacher, or everyday disciple, we are surrounded by people preparing the way, dreaming of something different for the world, dreaming of God's wholistic, holy vision for the world, that is in fact what the birth of Christ is all about.

Richard Rohr, quoting Brian McLaren this past week about social movements, like the one began by John the Baptist said this of Christianity: [Christianity] began as a revolutionary nonviolent movement promoting a new kind of aliveness on the margins of society. . . . It claimed that everyone, not just an elite few, had God-given gifts to use for the common good. It exposed a system based on domination, privilege, and violence

and proclaimed in its place a vision of mutual service, mutual responsibility, and peaceable neighborliness. It put people above profit, and made the audacious claim that the Earth belonged not to rich tycoons or powerful politicians, but to the Creator who loves every sparrow in the trees and every wildflower in the field. It was a peace movement.”<sup>1</sup> Prepare the way!

There may not be people standing in front of us with signs pointing us down the right path like the image on the front of our bulletin today, or maybe there are. Won't we commit to preparing the way? If so we must first repent. Repent of our sins, our sins of disbelief, our sins of harm, our sins of disconnection...all the sins that go against preparing the way for peace.

Our world is filled with opportunity, for a life that is on the path of peace even in the ordinary times, not just the big moments. As the Psalmist says, when we are restored to God, when we are baptized in the Spirit, when we follow the lead of those who prepare the way for life abundant, for Christ incarnate:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

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<sup>1</sup> McLaren, Brian. Spirituality and Social Movements. Daily Meditations. November 30, 2020. [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org)

Lives lived focused on what is ahead, what can be, sparked by joy and remembering the calling to which we have said yes, are lives that not only dream of peace, but create it. Prepare the way!

The way may be full of nay-sayers and doubters, those who deny that what we are saying is truth, those who look at us like we're odd or weird because we're doing things in a different way. But, Christ born in a baby, isn't exactly what was expected either. God has a way of using those of us who are least expected, and turning us into prophets, to dreamers, to disciples preparing the way for Christ to enter the world time and time again, at birth, at death, and in the ordinary, everyday moments.

Let us be the ones who join in God's dreams for peace in this world that is beyond ourselves, that is truly of Christ, so that when we meet Jesus on Christmas Day we see more than a baby entering the world, we see a call to bring together righteousness and peace for all.

May it be so.