

December 10, 2017
2nd Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

WATCH

The people of Israel are celebrating their release from captivity in Babylon and Isaiah encouraged them with words of hope. *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* They were not literally in the wilderness as they had been when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt. But they had been held captive and though they were returning to their homeland, it was not what it had once been in the glory days of King David. The temple is in ruins, there is no legitimate government in place, the land has been ravaged and neglected. They feel like they are in the wilderness with all its insecurities and instability. It's all good Isaiah says. The Lord is with you. Clear your hearts and minds, make a highway—a freeway—for the Lord. If you clear the path, nothing can keep the Lord from dwelling among you.

The writer of Mark revives Isaiah's words of hope and encouragement: *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,'"* Again, the people are not literally in the wilderness. But Mark is writing to a people that are living in a world that has deteriorated into chaos. It is about 40 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Israel, renamed Palestine, has been a puppet kingdom of the Roman Empire for over 100 years. Radical Jewish nationalists have attempted a revolution and now Jerusalem is under siege by Roman soldiers. The Temple that had been rebuilt after Isaiah's time has been permanently destroyed. The people who follow the Way of Jesus the Christ are members of a minority group living in fear of both the

occupying Roman authorities and the radical terrorist sect. They feel like they are in the wilderness with all its insecurities and instability.

It's all good Mark says. Remember the story. John the Baptist was crying out in the wilderness telling the people to clear their hearts and minds, change their ways and live lives of commitment and dedication to the Lord. The Lord who came and lived among us lives with us still. That is the Gospel message of Good News.

We don't live in a world of chaos, today. Those of us in this place of worship do not know what it feels like to live a condition of oppression and constant fear of being tortured and murdered because we call ourselves followers of Jesus.

But you watch CNN or Fox News every day, not both. No one watches them both. You get news updates streaming onto your pc or Ipad. You look at what is happening to your country and around the world. It seems that rather than gratitude for the comforts and conveniences of modern life, everyone is angry, incompetent, and intolerant. It seems your country is deeply divided by extreme political views labeled left and right, liberal and conservative. There is no moderation. No one will waiver. Compromise is considered weakness and so the country remains stagnant. Everyone is aware of serious social problems like poverty, hunger, immigration, prison mismanagement, and high crime, but the two sides don't agree on how to begin to address them, so nothing happens. You worry about the future. You wonder if the whole world has become so dysfunctional that our very way of life, our very future are in jeopardy. Maybe, surrounded by all your technology, and labor-saving devices, you feel like you are living in the wilderness.

And we read Mark's introduction to a story that happened so long ago and wonder How could this be good news for us today?

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:4 Repentance and confession

require self-examination. It means facing the truth about ourselves and changing the direction of our lives. It doesn't sound like good news. Especially that part about changing who we are, how are we supposed to do that? Why would we do that?

We would do that because we are longing to meet that Messiah. We would do that because in spite of all the angry voices and fear mongering we hear in the news we long for a better way; the way of the Lord.

Within the exhortations of John the Baptist to repent, seek forgiveness and make way the path for the Lord, there is the ring of hope. Those first century Galileans heard it. They flocked to John because they needed to hear it. Somewhere in the wilderness, there is a Messiah; a Messiah who will come, and take away the sins of the world. A Messiah who has come, who is with us still and who will come again. They needed to hear it. We need to hear it.

Hear it, watch for it and believe, responding in gratitude because the days are surely coming.

Let us pray:

Gracious and merciful Father, you are the creator and source of all that is good. We lift our thanks and praise for the gifts of faith, hope and charity. Most of all we give thanks that you sent your only Son for us and for our salvation. We pray for the mission of the church, that in faithfulness we will preach the Good News to our neighbors both close by and to the ends of the earth. We pray for our political leaders that they will serve justice. We pray for the poor, the persecuted and all who suffer; for refugees, prisoners, members of the military and all who are in dangers. Help us to rejoice in the fellowship of all the saints, and entrust ourselves and one another to Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.