

Advent Sermon¹

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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I.

It's the second Sunday of Advent; expectation fills the air. Advent lights shine in windows all around the neighborhood. At church we light our Advent candles, prepare the mitten tree and practice the pageant.

Halfway through the service we sing a not-too familiar hymn and pay some attention to words that sound as though they are going to be familiar but turn out not to be so familiar after all. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ..." And since we know how that good news begins, we listen for the beloved story of the angels singing, shepherds scurrying, and magi searching all those miles.

But Mark, as usual, surprises us. Either he's never seen a church pageant, or he deliberately ignores those features of the story we like best. For Mark, gospel, good news, does not begin with the manger.

II.

For Mark, the good news begins with the prophet: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.'" For Mark, the good news begins with what we call The Old Testament and our Jewish neighbors call Tanakh and what for Jesus and the first disciples was just plain Scripture. And the truth is, though we remember best the shepherds and the wise men, every one of our Gospels can only get underway by calling attention to the Old Testament, because the truth is that we can't get to the good news of Jesus in any other way.

In Luke's Gospel, even before the shepherds bow, there are songs sung by Mary and Zechariah that sound just like Old Testament psalms, and the very first words Jesus speaks when he begins his ministry are words from this same prophet, Isaiah. In Matthew's Gospel before we get to the birth or the magi, we go through the genealogy that fixes Jesus firmly in the history of Abraham and David and Rahab and Ruth. And in the first verse of John's Gospel we hear echoed the first verse of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God"; John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word." It is hard to get what John is saying in this astonishing prologue, but if we don't know Genesis, we haven't got a clue.

Some years ago I was on the committee recommending to the president of the University a new chaplain for Yale. One of the members was the late Donald Cohen, for many years the director of Yale's Child Study Center. One of the responsibilities of the committee was to travel to various churches to hear candidates preach on their home turf. Donald said that as a Jew, one thing that amazed him was how much Christian worship talked about the Jews. Donald said Jews can go to the synagogue week after week and not have to talk much about Christians, but Christians can't get through a worship service without Israel, the prophets, the law, the promises.

Sometimes Christians worry about Judaism in ways that are wise and open and sometimes in ways that are foolish and closed—but Donald had it right. Part of the Christian deal is that we can only understand ourselves in the light of God's dealings

with Israel, and we can only understand Jesus as the Jew he was.

In the light of this passage and in the light of the whole New Testament, it behooves us to remember that in the first century, the issue wasn't whether Jews could be part of God's covenant. The issue was whether Gentiles could. Israel's place was a given—the miracle was that the rest of us were now allowed to join the party. The miracle was that in the light of Jesus Christ, when we hear God speak through Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people," we Gentiles are actually included as part of God's people, too. It is something to think about the next time some ugly sign of anti-Judaism appears in our community or in our neighbors' conversation. If you want to get to Jesus Christ, there is no way to get to him that does an end run around Israel. You can't really know him without the Old Testament any more than I can really know you without knowing where you came from and who your family is. The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is Isaiah and Genesis and the Psalms.

III.

It's the second Sunday of Advent, and expectation fills the air. But Mark, as usual, surprises us. Either he's never seen a church pageant, or he deliberately ignores the features of the story we like best. For Mark, Gospel, good news, does not begin with the manger. For Mark, the good news begins with John the Baptist. So much less appealing than the babe in the manger—the prophet in the wilderness. Not swaddling clothes, but camel's hair and a leather belt. And—worse yet—not peace on earth, good will among people, but John the Baptist preaches "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The good news is also tough news. There is no way to get to Jesus without going through John the Baptist. No end run around the demanding prophet to get to the redeeming Christ. (Of course the redeeming Christ turns out to be pretty demanding, too, but that's another sermon.)

And again Mark is not so quirky as might first appear. Luke has the angels and shepherds. Matthew has the magi. John has the prologue and the Word made flesh—but in all four Gospels, before the grown-up Jesus can give one sermon or do one miracle, there is John the Baptist. There is no way to Jesus that doesn't go through the Old Testament, and there is no way to Jesus that doesn't stop and listen to John.

What John preaches of course is baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The heart of the matter is repentance. The good news of the Gospel begins with repenting the bad news of our lives before the Gospel came along. Christmas is not just a nice holiday to add to the other three hundred and sixty four days that go on as usual. Christmas is a turning point: put off the old; put on the new. Let it go. Lay it down. Repentance.

And John the Baptist stands as a stark and inescapable reminder that Christmas isn't just a matter of giving, it's a matter of giving up. Letting go whatever that old life is that keeps you from receiving the new life that comes with the incarnation of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perhaps more than any novelist of the twentieth century, Graham Greene puzzled about sin and repentance and forgiveness. In his novel, *The End of the Affair*,² Greene tells the story of Sarah, who is married to Henry, but is in love with Maurice. Her affair with Maurice is full of passion and delight and deceit and regret. More and more she is nagged by a vision of some fuller life that includes not only fidelity to her husband, but fidelity to a God in whom she barely believes.

It's World War II; it's London. Sarah is in the hotel room waiting for Maurice. She hears air raid sirens and then a terrible explosion. Sarah is sure that Maurice is dead. These are her words:

I knelt down on the floor. I was mad to do such a thing: I never even had to do it as a child. . . . I hadn't any idea what to say. Maurice was dead. Extinct. There wasn't such a thing as a soul.... I knelt and put my head on the bed and wished I could believe. Dear God, I said—why dear, why dear?—make me believe. I can believe. Make me, I said, I'm a (fool) and a fake. I hate myself. I can't do anything of myself. *Make* me believe. I shut my eyes tight. . . and I said, I will believe. Let him be alive and I *will* believe. . . . That wasn't enough. It doesn't hurt to believe. So I said, I love him, and I'll do anything if You'll make him alive. Let him be alive...and I said, people can love without seeing each other, can't they; they love you all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in the door, and he was alive, and I thought, now the agony of being without him starts.

The agony of being without him, the surprising possibilities of being with God, a return to her husband, the beginnings of faith. This is the beginning of the gospel, dear friends, but it is not just a matter of happy carols and cheerful lights. The way to Jesus leads through John the Baptist and the repentance of sins. That is tough news. It is good news, too.

IV.

In the church where we belonged in Oakland, there were a number of Advent customs that we learned to love. On the last Sunday of Advent, Christmas just about to come, two members of the choir sang in harmony the simple carol: "What Shall I Bring to the Babe in the Manger?" I've lost the rest of the lyric, but I'm quite sure that what we brought were all the good gifts of our lives—our talents, our love, our faith, our hope. Bring these, and lay them down at the manger.

But Advent is not only about giving; it's also about giving up. John the Baptizer, that scraggly, uncouth prophet stands as a constant reminder that there are other things to bring to the manger—to lay them down before the good news of God's Son. Maybe this Advent we should bring to the manger that old jealousy that has poisoned a relationship and soured our own joy. Maybe we should lay that down. That old regret that we didn't go the other direction, all those years ago. Time to lay it down. The disappointment in someone we loved, the disappointment in ourselves: lay it down. The anger at those who did not value us as we deserved. Lay it down. You know what it is, that damned thing you carry that can turn even the good news of Christmas into the same old Blah. Lay it down.

Christmastime is repentance time. You can bring it all. You can put it down. You can leave it all with the child who is strong enough to bear it all. Good news.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a sermon originally preached at Battell Chapel, Yale University, and published in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Ian Doescher, *To All God's Beloved in New Haven: David Bartlett's Yale Sermons* (Xlibris 2003).

2. Greene, Graham, *The End of the Affair*, (London: Penguin, 1991).