

Advent: Are We There Yet?

Mark 1:1-8

Carla Jones Brown

Arch Street Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Well, here we are in Advent ... again. For those of us with a particular set of worship experiences, we are in Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary ... again. For some preachers, this means searching our personal database of sermons to see what sounded relevant three years ago when this text made an appearance, so that we can prepare to preach from this text ... again. It is easy to feel both connected to and disconnected from Mark's message about the coming Jesus. Preachers and parishioners might find ourselves asking ... Are we there yet? So what do we do to prepare ourselves to receive the Advent directive to wait? We sing! Perhaps "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" will appear in a Sunday bulletin or "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People" may be the soundtrack of your days and nights for these four weeks. These songs call us to hear or remember the events that culminate in our celebration of the birth of the Christ child, and they provide a tie that binds us across denominations, generations, and other barriers that we have built in our attempt to protect the story of the One who came to break those same barriers.

One element of the COVID-19 lockdown that shaped Advent in 2020 was the loss of our ability to sing together and to let our voices join and swell and dance together in communal worship. We sang our songs to pre-recorded tracks that poured into our ears through headphones, earbuds, or computer speakers. The threat of the Coronavirus was so fierce that we dared not lift our voices and droplets into the air for fear of catching or transmitting the virus to someone else. Our songs were muted by masks, and that beautiful synching of breath that happens when we sing together was momentarily taken from us and we had to adjust. We were reminded of the impact of being isolated from one another, and even the collective act of singing had turned into what felt like the worst of karaoke in what should have been the best time of choral singing.

This isolation and non-elective solitude made it difficult for us to sing the songs that heralded the season. Perhaps we might have felt a particular closeness to John

the Baptist as it seemed like ours was a voice crying out in the wilderness, but we were not crying out or preaching a word of repentance. We were simply crying out into what felt like an empty space and longing to hear evidence that there was someone else out there. I can recall sending screenshots to a friend every time a choir song popped up in my playlist, and I imagined us standing together in a choir loft and singing the alto notes. She would send a laughing emoji or mark it with a double exclamation mark indicating that she understood and felt the same way. Under the threat of this virus, we found ways to connect with one another at a time when it seemed like contending with loneliness might be more dangerous than contracting the virus. We longed for connection and we lamented our separation and this was how we entered the sacred season of the liturgical year that calls us to wait with expectation for the arrival of the One who would change everything. And we found ourselves asking yet again, Are we there yet? Have we moved past this moment of separation? Is it safe to come out and play again? Is loneliness in the rearview mirror yet? How long, O Lord, before we can be together again?

Mark's gospel is an interesting choice for the second Sunday in Advent because as we read his words, we do not get a sense of waiting but rather a sense of immediacy. Mark does not begin with the birth narrative but situates us in a space where we encounter an adult Jesus whose active presence is startling when one expects a meek and lowly child who is dependent on His parents. Perhaps what we need is to be startled out of our old expectations and into a new set of expectations! Perhaps we need to consider what it means to use the word "again" when approaching the text in this season—as if Mark does not describe it as the "beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ" in verse 1. This beginning can function not only as a prelude to the text which follows but also as a sign pointing us away from our old expectations and into fresh, new expectations. Perhaps this is Mark's way of grounding us in the present moment and acknowledging that we need some good news that will make our hearts glad but that will also bind our hearts together so that we remember that we are not alone in our waiting. The question is not "Am I there yet?" but rather, "Are WE there yet?"

When I read the first verse of the text, I was reminded of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Although Plato's intent was different, I can see us sitting under the weighted blanket of our forced separation. I can imagine us bound not by chains but by the false belief that this separation is our new normal and we need not expect to be together again. We sit looking at the shadows on the wall cast by nostalgia, and we remember what was and long for what can be though it is hard to imagine—let alone expect—that there is something strong enough to help us to break free. The moment is not our friend but our captor, and so we wait, afraid to turn toward the light that is casting the shadow for fear that it might do us more harm than good. Into our space of nostalgia which feeds our loneliness, Mark's announcement breaks in and reminds us that this is not a time for longing for what was nor for fear of what might be, but,

instead, it is a time to actively wait with expectation of a promise fulfilled. This is but the beginning of the Good News. Just wait, there's more! But are we there yet?

Mark's announcement interrupts us and instead of simply propelling us forward, takes us back—not for nostalgic purposes, but for the purpose of recalibrating our journey and widening our lens. This is the *beginning* of the Good News but it is not the beginning of our larger story of God's relationship with us. The story was set in motion a long time ago, and here Mark uses the words of the prophet Isaiah as a bookend to the story. Mark's community would have understood this reference and been able to follow his logic. Having moved from what was foretold to the present moment, Mark tells of John the Baptizer who appeared in the wilderness. The wilderness is supposed to be an uninhabitable place, and yet, there is at least one sign of life in this wilderness. This is not a sign of the life that had become familiar and known, but instead, a new life! If permitted to revisit the allegory of the cave reference, I would imagine the shrugging off of the weighted blanket that has held us in place, separated from one another by both circumstance and illusion. No longer burdened by the weight of the blanket and now able to move around, we discover that we had companions on the journey all this time, but we were so deeply influenced by our circumstances that we were unable to see new ways to make connections. We thought we were waiting alone and waiting in vain, but perhaps we were in need of a messenger to break into our waiting to help us turn our energy from waiting for the worst to be over to waiting expectantly for what is to come.

This text references the words of a prophet, and John comes with the appearance of a prophet. He is the sign of life in the wilderness. He is not waiting for his wilderness time to end but rather this wilderness experience is just the beginning, and even he knows that he is one point on the journey and not the endpoint. Even with the appearance of John, we are still ... not there yet. John calls for repentance, and suddenly, he is surrounded by crowds of people. Again the uninhabitable wilderness is filled with people who manage to survive the journey and the circumstances. They might have traveled alone, but they have arrived together. I can feel the excitement building as John recalibrates their journey once more and tells them that he is not the final destination. His presence marks one part of the journey but One is yet on the way, and so we change our perspective while we wait to encounter the change and freedom that He will surely bring. As with those in the cave, the One referred to as the Light of the World may seem like too much to take in with eyes that have grown accustomed to shadows, but that is precisely when we are able to walk away from the shadows of the past and walk into the bright future that is promised in the Good News of Jesus—even if we are not there YET.

This is the story of us and the promise of Advent. We are on a journey that calls us to remember the past, see the present, and envision and wait for the future. So as we await that which has been promised, let us constantly recalibrate our journey and

our vision to see where we are. If we are stuck, let us repent—turn from the shadows on the wall and see things in a new light. Let us continue to enter Advent seasons not with the dread of repeating what has been but with the excitement of what can be. Let us enter these wilderness spaces knowing that they are mile markers with the power to shape us but not the final destination. Welcome to this season of waiting with expectancy and with community. This is just the beginning of the Good News ... there's more Good News awaiting us! The Good News is more the journey than the destination. So, are we there yet?