

Those Who Dream . . . Prepare the Way

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

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Advent—the season of waiting for the church. Most years, clergy urge churchgoers to slow down, to lift their heads from the sugar-induced stupor of holiday parties, to take a day where you don't run around frenzied, trying to complete the Christmas tasks, to be still and reflect.

But this Advent, I find myself impatient. We've been waiting. We've slowed down to a near stop. We've had more quality time with our immediate family members than we knew possible. We've stepped away from travels and traditions and gatherings in a big way. So, this year Advent feels more like salt in the sores we've developed from our sedentary waiting these last nine months instead of a welcome reminder of respite.

Advent is about the good news that comes in the midst of disorientation, the gifts the darkness brings. It's no accident we light candles during the season of Advent. As we journey toward Christmas, the nights get longer, the sun gets weaker, the days get colder—all leading toward the winter solstice, December 21st, the longest night of the year. We need all the warmth and light we can get. Things work the other way for Lent and Easter. In spring the days get brighter and warmer and longer as Easter draws near. But not so for Advent and Christmas. And so we light candles to remind ourselves that God is with us even in the deepest darkness.

"New life starts in the dark," Barbara Brown Taylor says. "Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark." But we know the darkness all too well this year. Do we really need to dwell on it for a month? This year, I find myself wanting to skip ahead without feeling beholden to waiting and preparation.

It's interesting that in Mark, the gospel for today, we don't get a birth story—no waiting, no shepherds or wise men, no Mary or Joseph. The good news doesn't begin with anything resembling Christmas. Instead we get this wild prophet, John the Baptist, and his call to repent. It's a call to action. Repentance is not really a welcome word for us, perhaps calling to mind old-time tent revivals or monks whipping themselves for every wayward thought, or that word most of us would prefer to steer clear of: sin.

The word *repentance* comes from the Greek *metanoia*, which means to think again, to think anew, to have a change of mind, a change of consciousness. As Mary Oliver says,

The path to heaven
doesn't lie down in flat miles.

It's in the imagination
with which you perceive this world,
and the gestures
with which you honor it.

Repentance is about the imagination; it's the ability to dream a new dream. It's about seeing differently. You know that famous optical illusion where the same image can be seen as either an old woman or young woman? Most of us see only one of the images when we first look at it, but with some effort, some imagination, some refocusing of our vision, we can get ourselves to see the other. Repentance invites us to shift our imagination, to see a new pattern, to see the light sometimes hidden in the dark—to open ourselves to the joyous, liberating surprises of God.

Maybe that's the invitation we need from Advent this year—not time set apart from the chock-full calendars of holiday cheer, not a retreat from hustle and bustle, not even a time to simply be. Maybe there's no better invitation for us right now than the invitation to shift our imaginations, to dream a new dream. After a long, dark year, we need that kind of repentance.

Because it's been one unprecedented event after another, all against the backdrop of a pandemic that completely shut down our world and upended our lives and a political season that nearly drove us all mad. It reached the point where there were so many improbable events on the heels of one another that the improbable began to feel like the most probable. A Hurricane. And another. And another. And another. Murder hornets. Remember those? An RV sized asteroid giving the earth a close shave? Spotify summed it up by saying to subscribers “thanks for spending all 67 months of the year with us.” And it's felt like that—endlessly waiting for this year to make it to our rearview mirrors.

But what if we take this season of Advent, the rest of this year even, to repent, to see differently. What if we stretch our imaginations and dare to dream that a new thing is possible. We'll be able to gather around tables again with those we love. Our kids will go back to school. We will gather in crowds and attend concerts. We'll properly celebrate and say goodbye to those we've lost. We'll gather to toast those who are getting married. We'll be able to share this sanctuary together. We'll be able to see each other's faces and hold each other's hands and make music together again.

Yes, a new thing is possible. This year will end, and the isolation and the masks and sanitizing fountains will one day be stories we tell our children, only distant memories instead of our reality. Let's dare to dream that's true. But let's not stop there.

A new heaven and a new earth, no more weeping or cries of distress, no infant mortality or premature death, no war or invasion or brutality—people build houses and get to live in them, people plant crops and get to eat their fruit, children are not born in poverty or calamity, the wolf and the lamb feed together, no one hurts or destroys anymore. Why not go a little crazy with our dreams this Advent season?

Isn't that what this season is all about? The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Generation after generation waited for some light, some sign that God was still with them, that the world could become something new. And they found their long-suffering hopes and dreams fulfilled on that holy night in that little town of Bethlehem.

Of course their dreams weren't fulfilled in exactly the ways they expected. After crying out to God, after years of waiting for an answer, their answer finally came in the silence of a stable. God didn't send a mighty king to defeat all the enemies of Israel, as so many had hoped. Instead God sent a tiny little baby, shivering in the cold, a baby who had to have his diapers changed just like every other baby on the planet. How could the people not have been surprised? So they too had to repent, had to learn how to see again, to imagine differently, to see the divine creativity at work remaking the world in a tiny manger surrounded by sheep and donkeys.

Listen to the words of Frederick Buechner: "So in Christ's name, I commend this madness and this fantastic hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past, that in some way we cannot imagine holiness will return to our world. I know of no time when the world has been riper for its return, when the dark has been hungrier. Maybe the very madness of our hoping will give him the crazy, golden wings he needs to come on."

The birth of Jesus was but one moment in Christ's coming—a moment which is repeated again and again in each of our lives and in the life of the world to come. So we are called to wait, to watch, to dream—even in the darkest darkness, even in the most abysmal abyss, even in the most absent absence of God.

In this holy season of Advent, I invite you not to wait passively, but to get to work. I invite you to repent, to dream differently, to see the light sometimes hidden in the dark—to open yourself to the joyous, liberating surprises of God.

May it be so.