

Isaiah 40: 1-11, 2 Peter 3: 8-15a, Mark 1: 1-8  
While We Are Waiting...

With Christmas only two weeks away, how is the time flowing for you? How are you filling your hours these days? What is demanding your attention, your energy? What is tugging at your heart? If Christmas were tomorrow, will you find yourself at peace?

On this second Sunday of Advent, we are moving deeper into the season where, if we open ourselves to the timeless story of God and God's people, we can see our lives join the lives of our ancestors in faith. Like the separate streams of waters flowing through time and space, our faith journeys join the mainstem river, flowing together towards the open sea of God's Eternal Realm. It all happens while we are waiting...

Margaia just read for us the beginning of chapter 40 from the Book of Isaiah, which signaled a new era in the history of God's people. Leading up to the end of chapter 39, the people of Israel had strayed from the way of the Lord and the prophet was warning them of the end of their collective life as they knew it. Somewhere between chapter 39 and chapter 40, it materialized in the form of exile in the foreign land of Babylon; they were uprooted from their land and taken captive, their temple destroyed.

Now in Chapter 40, God commands God's subjects in the heavenly court "Comfort my people, already! They've suffered enough. They are forgiven of their misguided past."

Then another voice that speaks for God cries out: in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." In the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the things "wilderness" represents is a place that is an aftermath of destruction. But it is also where God reached out to them, out of God's endless compassion. Even when we humans fail to uphold our part in the Covenant with God and find ourselves in the wilderness, God honors God's promise to us and remains our God.

With words of comfort, God would have us prepare a new path in the wilderness, removing all that is in the way, smoothing out all the bumps and filling out all the cracks, so that everyone can follow that highway to God. This is what we know from the experience of our ancestors in faith about our compassionate God who makes possible a new way out of the wilderness of our own making. People are like the grass that withers and flower that fades, but God with God's unfailing love is unchanging.

Can you recall the wilderness places you've come through in your life? Can you see its shape and feel its terrain? Do you remember the roadblock that made you stumble and the pitfalls you failed to avoid, even as you tried to be the best you that God created you to be? Could you name them? Pride? Jealousy? Greed? Or putting your trust in a wrong place or in wrong things, or perhaps in a wrong person. That would be idolatry.

And how about our life as a community, as a country? The Scripture urges us to ask this question, because, God is talking about the situation of the whole people of God, as personified in Jerusalem, and not just my situation personally. When we look all around us, at our society and our world today, is it a wilderness in the making or are we preparing a new path, removing the stumbling blocks of injustice, prejudice, violence, abuse of power and resources... Where is your life at work in all of this?

God meets us where we are with those words of Comfort – past is forgiven and the path to the future is to be made. However, God does not say “I’ll make that highway appear with a snap of my fingers.” No, the Divine voice urges *us* to “Prepare the Way of the Lord.” That is our work to do, the way through the wilderness, with God’s help of course, but how?

Somebody carried the voice from the prophet and spoke to the people in another wilderness at another time, in fact, hundreds of years later. Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark, Chapter 1: 1-8.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” ’, 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.’

It is John the Baptist, taking his fashion cue from the House of Prophets, where the signature look was a hairy mantel. It had been a long time since the last sitting of a prophet. And it seems that life turns into wilderness, whenever God’s messenger or prophet go missing. The people coming to John in this wilderness were those who lived under the rule of another oppressor, the Roman empire.

The Gospel writer Mark casts John as the messenger who prepares the way for Jesus the Messiah, or the Christ. So, the work of “preparing the way” that was John’s to do was to offer anyone who came the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But John, as the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” is also urging everyone to “Prepare the way of the Lord,” and the work of preparing that is theirs, and ours, to do is to repent. You may remember, the word for “repent” in Greek means “to change one’s mind,” and the Hebrew verb means “to turn around;” it is to change one’s heart, will and actions. It takes our owning up to our mistakes and the wrong we’ve done.

God is patiently waiting for us to “to change our minds and turn” from the ways that had led us to the wilderness and start living as forgiven people, now walking in the way of the Lord. In this sense, Baptism is a mutual act of collaborative renewal by the sinning humans coming forward, recognizing one’s sins to receive forgiveness from the already-and-always forgiving God.

Mark shows us, at the very beginning of the story he tells, how the good news of Jesus Christ is connected to the prophecies of salvation told in the Hebrew Scripture. Our Christian heritage, handed down from the Jewish tradition and wisdom interweaves the old and the new.

But as at the time of John’s baptism by water, people were still waiting for the Messiah. And John proclaims, someone greater than he was coming. Mark’s Gospel offers no story of Jesus’ birth, but the anticipation is there all the same; we can feel the longing of the people for the Messiah. So here, we, who know that the Christ came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and the rest of his story, our hisstory, can join them in the anticipation of the first coming of God in flesh.

But there is more to the story. In today’s Epistle reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3: 8-14, we meet yet another generation of our ancestors in faith, waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, his Second Coming, just like we are today. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter was written at the time when the first generation of Christians, those who were waiting for the risen Christ to return in their lifetime, had all passed away and the Christ still had not returned. So, there arose a group within their circle who scoffed at the idea of the Second Coming and the final judgment. They stopped keeping watch and staying awake, as we’ve been told by Jesus, and didn’t see any point in “preparing the way of the Lord.” And they started to convince others to stop waiting, too; it’s waste of time. So, the letter was written to protect the Christians from this group of false

teachers. As Christians, waiting for the Day of the Lord when everything is made new, it is written for us as well. So, hear now, the letter from a follower of the great apostle Peter to those who wait.

2 Peter 3: 8-16

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

While we are waiting, our lives join the lives of all those with whom we share in the common the task of preparing the Way of the Lord. Daily changing our minds to align the mind of Christ's; proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, saying "Here is our God." We no longer count the days, because we know we don't need to, if we live every moment knowing our lives, however short or long, is woven into the timeless plan of God who keep the promise that God will restore and renew everything. May the peace of Advent fill your days as you wait....