

Change is Coming

Texts: **Isaiah 40:1-11**; from Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*; **Mark 1: 1-8**

Mark is truly a strange gospel. It begins with these stirring words: “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” We expect that what we will hear next is something about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That would be normal, that would be natural. Big intro, tell us about Jesus. But no. That’s not what Mark does. He says, “Hang on now, we have some prep work to do first. You see, the beginning of Jesus’ story doesn’t happen with Jesus’ birth. It starts at least 6 centuries before, with the words of Isaiah telling God’s intention. Then John the Baptist appeared.” We’re so used to it that we don’t see how really weird that is. It would be like someone writing about the moon landing: “Here’s the beginning of the story of Neil Armstrong, the first human to set foot on the moon. In 1492 Columbus set out on the ocean with three ships.... And then came Jim Lovell, who orbited the moon with Apollo 8.” We’d be like, “wait, what?” Eventually we might come to see that Columbus’ story is about daring risk and human exploration, that it led to the European discovery of America, and America led to powered flight with the Wright brothers in 1903. Then, an amazingly short 65 years later, Jim Lovell made it to lunar orbit and a year after that came Neil Armstrong’s “One small step...” onto the moon.

So it is with the story of Jesus. It doesn’t start with Jesus. It’s been a long time coming. It starts out long before in a promise of God made through Isaiah. You could go back farther than that if you wanted, like our imagined storyteller about Neil Armstrong might have started with brave and daring humans migrating out of East Africa millennia before. But here’s where Mark starts, with Isaiah and a promise from God. God’s been working on this for a long time. And even when we get right up to the doorstep of Jesus and his coming, Mark insists that we ground the story further, in John the Baptist, whom God sent first. Like every great work of God, Jesus doesn’t just come out of nowhere. There’s a history that brings us to this moment in time, and there are people who set the stage. One of those people is John the Baptist. He’s a voice out in the wilderness. Out in the wilderness. That’s a good introduction to John, because, friends, he’s out there! He’s like some ancient hippy, wearing camel’s hair, a leather belt and eating locusts and wild honey. He’s not in the city, but out on the outskirts of civilization. If you came across him on the road by the Jordan River, you might have said to your traveling companions, “What’s that crazy-looking guy shouting about over there?” If you investigated further, you’d find that he was shouting about changing your life: stop doing what you’re doing, and do something different, because you aren’t going to believe what God is going to do

next! John's way of preparing the ground for Jesus is to call on people to change, to look inside themselves and see where their lives need to change before God comes. The traditional word for that is repentance.

John preaches about repentance, which literally means a rethink: a rethink about your actions and attitudes, a rethink even about the society you live in. John is, after all, literally calling people to come out of their society to meet him in the wilderness. He's not making any bones about it: you have to come out of society before you can go back in and make a change. You have to rethink who you are if you're going to be ready. John is calling for a restart of your life, both personally and socially. His preaching leads to that, and he symbolizes the big change you're going through with baptism. Baptism washes away the old and ushers in the new. Down into the water you go, and when you re-emerge, you're starting over with a new way of living. Your rethink has taken effect, and you're ready for what comes next. You're ready.

That's the beginning of the good news of Jesus: the preparation which God has made, from Isaiah to John, the preparation of God's people through repentance and a change of life, through a rethink of what they are personally doing, and what they are doing as a society. Jesus comes when God's people are alive and awake and on the move to doing something better. That was true for the people of the first century, and it's true for us as well. As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' coming once more, it's good for us to take John's words to heart, to look inside ourselves and see where we have to change personally, and to look at our society, to see what has to change there, too.

This year, 2020, I think that's been happening more than in many years. Our society has been in upheaval. We've been confronting the racism in our society and in ourselves. We've been asking some hard questions, like: Why don't I have any Black friends? Why are white people so unaware of the violence that Black people face so often? Why did it take so many Black deaths before we took to the streets to insist that Black lives matter? Why are Black people dying from COVID at three times the rate of white people? Why does half our nation still not care? The virus itself has brought our mortality to the fore. We are all just a few weeks from possible death if we catch this thing. That can serve to clarify our minds wonderfully about what's right and wrong with our lives before we meet God.

While we're making so many changes in the way we live to protect our physical health, we should ask ourselves what changes we ought to make to protect our spiritual health. What do we need to do to prepare for Christ's coming? What will make us ready for his appearance?

Back in John's time, they still had to wait for Christ, had to wait for the one who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. But we don't have to wait any longer.

This is the paradox of our faith: while we wait to celebrate his coming, we know the one who has already come. We know the one who is with us now, who has sent the Holy Spirit to us, and who makes himself present in the bread and wine on our communion table. We have an advantage over the people John called to repentance: we have Christ in our hearts, to direct our new life if we ask him. The preparation has been done, and all is ready: let Christ come to you now in the bread and the wine.

Amen