

Look for God on the Margins
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Announcements

Jane Alexander is 90 today!

Mark 1:1-8 NRSV

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’ ”

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Title: Look for God on the Margins

On the margins of life...

At the beginning of his gospel, Mark doesn’t start by talking about Jesus. He talks about John. John is, as it were, the warm-up act. It’s John’s job to get the people ready to experience the headliner, the main event. John is going to set the tone for everything that is to come, and set people’s expectations for what the main event will be like. As great as he is, Yo-Yo Ma doesn’t tour with the Rolling Stones.

If we want to know what Jesus’ ministry will be about, John is the one who tells us, and prepares us.

Mark says the John did three things. He *appeared*, he *baptized*, and he *proclaimed*.

John appeared.

God had been silent for 400 years. Israel is under Roman occupation. The threat of unrest and violence is constant. Local religion and politics is marked by corruption, hypocrisy, and incompetence. The average person feels utterly powerless to make things better. Hope is almost completely gone. Jesus himself will describe the people as “sheep without a shepherd.”

And then, as if out of nowhere, John appears. He appears out in the wilderness, at the edge of

things. His father was a priest, we know. So he grew up an insider. But now he is standing where prophets stand – at the edge of the inside. He is wearing what prophets wear – the same uniform Elijah wore according to 1 Kings 1:8. As a prophet, John holds up a mirror to his people and says, “Don’t kid yourself.” He calls people out on their “stuff.” But even with all that tough love, he points people back to God. He assures them that God hasn’t forgotten about them. He reminds them that there is a way back.

When have you experienced long silences from God? What was it about? How did it feel when you saw God acting in that situation again?

John baptized.

The people had to go find John out in the wilderness, eating locusts and honey. John was living off the grid, living off the land, living sustainably long before that was “a thing.” But more than all that, he was intentionally turning his back on a corrupt political and religious system, declaring it morally bankrupt and completely broken.

If they wanted to participate in what he was up to, people would have to go to the edge of the inside too. They had to stand at the edge of things and see them in a new light. It takes a lot of courage to do that, to question the status quo. But everything about the gospel story tells us they were desperate. They were desperate for change. Can you relate to that?

So they left their farms and their market stalls and went to see John surrounded by God’s creation. It isn’t very different from what we do today when we go to a conference or stay a monastery or retreat house, is it? People from both the city and the countryside were coming because people from every walk of life were wanting a change of mind and a change of heart. They were ready for a fresh start.

When they got there, John led them to action. They had a chance to do something physical and visceral. They got baptized. As Christians we see this and don’t realize what a big deal that was. Presumably all the people who were going out to see John were Jewish. Baptism was what Gentile people did as part of entering Judaism. Being part of the covenant was quite literally their birthright. So why were they submitting to this “baptism of repentance”? They wanted to get clean of the corruption outside of them and the sin inside them. They wanted to be initiated into a new way of living. They wanted to be part of something that was good, that reflected God’s values. They wanted to make a difference by being different themselves.

In what ways do you want to be different? Where do you long for God’s transforming power to come again into your life? What are you willing to do, where are you willing to go, to experience that?

John proclaimed.

When John someone says he is preparing the way for someone more powerful than him, his hearers were almost certainly NOT thinking about a person. Of course we do.

But every prophet before John was pointing people to God. Prophets spoke up for God’s agenda. John’s first hearers would have assumed John was preparing the way for Yahweh.

When John says he is preparing the way for someone more powerful than him, someone to whom he regards himself little more than a slave, someone who won't merely change our direction but transform us from the inside out with divine power, of course people thinking he is talking about God the transcendent. But he is preparing them to meet God the intimate. Not only has God broken 400 years of silence. God has moved into the neighborhood. God has a face.

Mark tells us this is a story about Jesus of Nazareth. Mark sets that up with his opening sentence, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We gloss over that sentence, but it is loaded with meaning and it will take the entire story to adequately unpack what Mark means by good news, Christ, and Son of God.

The fact that John is preparing the way for a person – Jesus – is just the first of many mindblowing things Mark is going to present in this story. Again—we are so familiar with Mark's gospel we find ourselves "looking" at it but not really "seeing" it!

Have you ever been surprised by God doing something far more personal and loving and intimate than you could have imagined? Has God ever blown your mind like this?

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The greatest good of this good news is that God has chosen to show up at the center, but on the margins. John, as Jesus whom he introduces, are both men who will appear and minister on the margins. Throughout this story Jesus will seek out those on the margins to let them know that God sees them, God has not forgotten them, and God wants them.

If we identify ourselves as marginalized people, then the gospel is incredibly good news to us. But the truth is, Jesus sought out the kind of people most of us spend our whole lives trying to avoid.

My challenge to us this Advent is to let God move us to the edge of the inside, where we can see the things we hold so dear with honest eyes. My prayer is that God would give you the grace to spend time with people you typically avoid because they are so different from you and so difficult for you. God came to earth as a person just like them. God entered human history as one of them. May we follow Jesus and realize he is leading us to not only care about them from a distance, but to know them and to love them as he does.

Let us hold them in our minds and hearts as we come to the Lord's Table now, and prepare to go to them afterward