



The Way Home

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

Mark 1:1-8

We are in Advent. Now when I was growing up, I went to a church that did not honor the season of Advent. In fact I never heard of it until I became an adult. At first when I encountered the season of “Advent” I thought it was pretty much synonymous with “Christmas.” At the first Episcopal Church I went to I remember wondering why, during Advent, were we not singing many of the Christmas carols I loved so much? I had no idea that churches throughout time and space had always honored a season of holy waiting, even of urgent longing, during the weeks leading up to the birth of Christ. Advent is the Church’s New Year, and it comes, not with fanfare and fireworks, but with longing. It comes with a willingness to face the things our souls are missing. As the wheel of the year turns toward the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year, we are invited to get quieter, and more reflective, and get in touch with our deepest needs.

For some of us, because of our life circumstances, we’re already there. Some of us have lost loved ones, some of us are unhappy at school or at work. Some of us are experiencing the weight of the national political turmoil, we are troubled about the number of sexual harassment suits out there and about the culture and environments that cause them. Some of us experience microaggressions and being invisible and we long for the day we can be seen and valued, for who we are, regardless of what our social position might be. And others of us aren’t in the place of longing at all. Our lives are good. We’re at peace. But we’ve all had periods of longing and of need, and we will again, and that place of longing and need is what Advent is all about.

The people of Israel at the time of Jesus were experiencing longing like this. Mark's gospel, where today's gospel reading comes from, was written just about exactly around the time that Rome razed the city Jerusalem and its Temple to the ground, and Jews fled into exile in the great diaspora. So the Jews were desperate. They needed hope. And into that longing Mark's gospel was written. In the midst of that season of hopelessness, Mark introduces the Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Without further ado he is immediately talking about John the Baptizer, who appeared in the wilderness according to the prophet Isaiah, saying "Prepare the Way of the Lord." What in the world does that mean?

Isaiah had been written when Jews were exiled to Babylon – another time when the Jews were homeless and suffering. When Isaiah says, "Comfort, comfort O my People," and "prepare the way of the Lord," he is saying that God is making them a way home out of exile. The way of the Lord is clearing all the obstacles between you and God; all the obstacles between you and home. God was saying to them, you are getting ready to end your exile, you are getting ready to go home. So when John the baptizer appears in the wilderness crying out and quoting the prophet Isaiah, all this history is triggered for the listening Jews. They remember the messenger who led them out of the oppression of Babylon, and out of the oppression of Egypt too. It's no wonder they flocked to John the Baptizer from all over Judea and everywhere else. They were living in their homeland, but it didn't feel like home for them because they were under the oppression of Rome, just like they had been under Babylon and Egypt before that. And John came, proclaiming "the way of the Lord" – the way home – through the most unlikely character imaginable, Jesus of Nazareth, whose way was about radical mercy and love and belonging for all.

John's words ignited dry tinder in the Jewish people, the dry tinder of their longing and suffering and hope. This is why the church's new year always starts with advent, with the season of longing. It's why we can have courage to face our longings. We too remember the stories of our tradition and the ways we are still living into those stories. We are living now at a time where it is literally hard to know what is real. This nation, our nation, is a mighty empire in which different

factions are telling different stories, each one accusing the other of fake news, each one trying to define who we are. Our president tells one kind of story, his political opponents tell another kind of story, and many of us want to shut it all out or fight because it can be so confusing or so appalling. What is real? What is healthy? What is possible? How do we know?

In the middle of this wilderness we live in, Advent comes crashing in. Advent reminds us that “as long as we let the world, instead of the gospel, narrate who we are, we are complicit in our slavery to empire.”¹ We can face and name our longings for justice and kindness and character and honesty. Then we can do the urgent work of asking God to help us see the good news that has already come. The good news is that in Christ we are given a third identity, a different narrative, a narrative of radical love and mercy for all. It’s a narrative that shows us the way home through the exile of not-belonging that is created wherever empire oppresses or devalues anyone, because whenever anyone is excluded, no one can truly belong, no one can truly be safe. In the middle of empire then and empire now, John comes preaching in the wilderness, saying that the way of the Lord is coming. It is a way that gives us an identity that transcends party and gender and age and color. In the way of Jesus, the love of God builds bridges where there had been only separation. It is the way of Jesus, and it leads to the Beloved Community.

So have courage to name your longings. Have courage to name the places you or others are in exile, where you feel you or others do not belong. If you are at peace right now, have the courage to look around and see the anguish and the longing of many around you. And from that place, it’s time to pray and then act. We pray in hope and faith that God does answer prayer, often through our hands and voices and homes and hearts. We stand in a long line of spiritual ancestors who have been exiles before, we know what wilderness is like. The good news of Jesus is that there is a way home.

¹ Anatheia Portier-Young, “Apocalyptic Preaching,” June 1, 2009, in *Working Preacher*, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1835>, accessed December 7, 2017.