

December 7, 2008

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B (Isaiah 40.1-11, Mark 1.1-8)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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One of the most recent refrains we hear often from the mouth of our two-year-old is "Hard to wait." He says it with solemn resignation, talking about anything from red lights when riding in the car to the check out line in the grocery store. "*Hard to wait.*"

He's right, of course. It is hard to wait. And it seems like right now, we're doing a lot of waiting, watching and waiting. We've been waiting to see how Congress would deal with the American automakers. We're waiting to see how our pension and IRAs will fare. We're waiting for the real estate market to bounce back. We're waiting for the economy to show some signs of life. We're waiting to see if our jobs will return.

There is some amount of idealistic promise in the thought of the new administration. We're waiting for that too, and for that hope we've so often heard about to come and soothe our worried minds.

If you are anything like me, you're not even sure what we're waiting for or how long it will take. Unlike in the grocery store, I can't count the number of people in line in front of me, and eyeball the things in their carts to estimate how long I'll be there. We just have to wait. Indeterminate and frustrating amounts of time.

And friends, we all know, it is *hard* to wait. It is especially hard to wait with baited fearful breath, in uncertainty and in anxiety.

While we're waiting, let's turn to the Gospel, shall we?

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

That's how Mark begins.

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But Mark doesn't launch into the expected story of the census, the birth in the manger, the shepherds and wise men. Mark skips that part and goes straight into the story of the local village weirdo, John, cousin of Jesus, who eats bugs and wears hides and goes around proclaiming...

What? What exactly is John proclaiming?

"Prepare the way of the Lord!" What does that mean?

With his words, John the Baptist conjures up Isaiah, the second part of Isaiah, where God is promising evenness, comfort, and change. The people of the time who heard John's words would have immediately known the reference and known exactly what John was hollering about:

In this part of Isaiah, the people of Israel are in captivity in Babylon. They feel broken and abandoned by the God they betrayed. They are lost and wondering if they'll ever return to the land and life they love. They wonder if they will ever be comforted again.

And through the prophet Isaiah, their fear and dismay is answered:

Comfort, Comfort my people...

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

God is with them. God has not abandoned them. The covenant between God and Israel is renewed and they will be God's people forever.

Comfort, comfort my people.

John recalls these words with his ranting and the people hearing him would have known exactly what he was talking about.

But why? The people are no longer in exile, so why stir this pot? Because God is coming, says John!

Through the story of John the Baptist, Mark tells us that this is the beginning of the good news. The good news in Mark is that these ancient hopes from Isaiah have been fulfilled. The rough places have been made plain, the hills and valleys smoothed out, just as God covenanted with the people so long ago.

The hopes have been fulfilled, says John the Baptist, by the God who is coming to be among us. A God so powerful that we aren't worthy to be slaves, but a God so deeply in love with us that he will walk among us just to be closer to where we are.

But John is asking a bigger question here, too. Are we ready for this God? Are we ready to be so beloved? Are we ready to be so overpowered?

God is coming, says John. It is time for us to get ready. It is time to prepare the way of the Lord.

There are many interpretations of what we're supposed to do in order to get ready for the coming of God to be among us. Confess, repent, ask forgiveness. Or we can spend time in self examination, laying our flaws bare to the elements. We can pray deeply for our hearts to be turned toward what is right and good and holy in the world. We can fall on our knees in thanksgiving and begin to understand ourselves and unworthy of the grace that has come to us. Good things to do, each of them.

There are all kinds of ways to prepare. John doesn't really give us any good indication on what we're supposed to do. How do we prepare ourselves so that God will come? How do we get ready for that which we do not deserve? **WHAT IN THE WORLD CAN WE DO TO GET GOD HERE???**

Nothing. There's not one thing we can do to hasten the coming of God to be among us. Nothing in the actions of our hands or hearts or heads will get God here. Nothing we can do can make it happen.

And there's nothing we can do to stop it, either.

John was heralding the coming of God almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. John was not making God's presence happen, John was making God's presence known. John was giving us those of us willing to listen fair warning that world as we knew it was about to change, would never, never be the same.

John was instructing us to get ready for the change, but in no way did John make us think that God would wait for our preparations.

By recalling Isaiah, John conjured up the remembrance that prepared or unprepared, God is coming in love, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom."

John's radical proclamation, that God was coming to be among us, was not intended to cause a frenzy of activity. It was not to raise folks' anxiety levels or create feelings of inadequacy among believers. It was a message of hope to a world crying out in desperate need of it.

Comfort, comfort my people. Do not be anxious. God is coming. God is near.