

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

**Second Sunday of Advent**

Year B

RCL



Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

Mark 1:1-8

**The Collect**

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Isaiah 40:1-11**

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her

that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.”

A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,

“Here is your God!”

See, the Lord GOD comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

**Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 Page 708, 709, BCP**

*Benedixisti, Domine*

- 1 You have been gracious to your land, O LORD,  
you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.
- 2 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people  
and blotted out all their sins.
- 8 I will listen to what the LORD God is saying,  
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people  
and to those who turn their hearts to him.
- 9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth have met together;  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
- 11 Truth shall speak down from heaven.
- 12 The LORD will indeed grant prosperity,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness shall go before him,  
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet. rising up from the earth,  
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
- 12 The LORD will indeed grant prosperity,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness shall go before him,  
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.

**Mark 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.”

## SERMON

Advent. A coming into place, view, or being; arrival; onset, beginning, commencement, start. We start the liturgical year with the first Sunday in Advent. During Advent, we anticipate the arrival of Jesus Christ. Another Gospel story comes into view as we try to get a handle on this enormously strange, enormously familiar, enormously over-laid event – the coming of Jesus Christ into the world as an infant. So Advent in year B, when we read from Mark, is always a little ironic. Mark says not a word about it. The Gospels of Mark and John contain no infancy narratives. No flight to Egypt. No Wise Men. No Bethlehem, Drummer Boys, Santa Claus or mangers. Nothing. Just the simple statement:

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

Here is another irony. It is hard to see good news in

Mark's telling of the story. In Mark's telling, those closest to Jesus constantly misunderstand Him, pressing on Him their own expectations then abandoning Him at the last. The only ones who recognize Jesus as the Son of God are His cousin John, the demons He casts out and, at the last, a lone Roman Centurion.

In the earliest manuscripts we have, there's not even a resurrection. The text ends at Mark 16:8 on a note of inexpressible sorrow and loss as the women discovering the empty tomb flee.

<sup>8</sup> Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

That was too heart-breaking. A later hand or hands added the longer endings of Mark<sup>1</sup> in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, and she reports to the others,

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<sup>1</sup> Some manuscripts have the following ending between verses 8 and 9, and one manuscript has it after verse 8 (omitting verses 9-20): Then they quickly reported all these instructions to those around Peter. After this, Jesus himself also sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.

who do not believe until Jesus appears to them. You'll see that as a footnote in your pew Bibles.

So, where's the good news in this bleak Gospel? Where is the happy anticipation of the arrival of the precious baby Jesus that we have come to expect as our due in this season? Where are the parables, the teachings? Where's the hope of Resurrection? What business does this guy have calling this a Gospel if it doesn't have anything in it that I'm entitled to expect in a proper Gospel? "Gospel", after all, means "good news". Where's the happy stuff?

Yet, there it is, and there it has remained for two thousand years. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It sounds as if this Mark guy is going to stretch us a little. Maybe a lot!

We're not happy, generally, with having our expectations stretched. We expect to find our comfort in the

traditions and worship forms that have always sustained us. We gather together each Sunday in pretty much the same way that Protestants have gathered for the past 400 years or so, to hear the Word proclaimed, to share the sacraments, to strengthen and encourage one another. We sing familiar hymns, hear comforting sermons, share with one another our understanding of God's requirements of us. We confess our sins and vow to be more mindful of the ways in which our failures to live the life Jesus showed us serve to make life more difficult for others. And we have every right to expect just that when we come through the church doors. So what does this Mark guy think he's up to with no Christmas and no Easter?? Are we not entitled not to have our cages rattled in this way?

But fuss though we might, there it sits, the Second Gospel, like a whooping big speed bump on our high-

way of happy thoughts, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” and there it has sat from the very beginnings of the early church. Eusebius of Caesarea quotes Papias about the Gospel and Papias was speaking about the year 120 or 130 of the common era. For two thousand years, this odd little book has been treasured by the Church as the Inspired Word of God and yet it fails in our expectations at every turn. What can be the message here?

Look at that riveting first line. Matthew and Luke, where all the good Christmas stuff is, make a big deal of proving to the reader that Jesus is who he is portrayed to be by demonstrating that nature itself announced his presence, through a star, through hosts of angels. Mark has none of that.

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

Mark makes no effort to offer proof of Jesus' identity. That is not up for question in Mark's Gospel. There are no heavenly angels announcing the birth, no stars, no Magi because Mark starts from this simple statement: Jesus is the Son of God. Mark's Gospel is not about proving who Jesus is, nor explaining how that came to be. Mark's Gospel starts from that foundational statement, rather like Martin Luther's words 1500 years later, "Hier stehe Ich. Kann Ich anders." – "Here I stand. I can do no other." In the manner of a 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE prophet, like our passage from Isaiah, Mark speaks to us directly. "This is the way it is", he tells us. As his story unfolds, Mark will also tell us, "This is the consequence of the way it is."

That's where the stretching of our expectations start. When Kat was a little girl, we read to her at night, and because I am a naughty daddy, sometimes I'd change

one of her favorite stories, just to pull her chain. The result was always the same. “Nooo, daddy!”, she’d wail. “That’s not how it goes.”

That’s the experience we have when we courageously read Mark’s Gospel and face up to the places in it where it fails to follow our expectations of the story. “Noooo!” we cry. “That’s not how it goes”.

But it does. If we want to read Mark’s Gospel with integrity, we have to take to heart the words of the Psalm today:

I will listen to what the LORD God is saying,  
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people  
and to those who turn their hearts to him.

Reading Mark’s Gospel with integrity means reading what is actually there, not pressing upon it our wishes and desires for things that aren’t actually in it. Mark’s Gospel isn’t about confirming what you expected to hear. It isn’t about making you feel all warm and cozy.

Mark's Gospel is about self-denying love, the lonely, unacknowledged servant path that Jesus walked alone. The way which cannot be understood through any lens but that of the cross. Keep that in mind this year. Mark's Gospel cannot be understood through any lens but that of the cross. We'll talk a lot about that.

Mark shows us that the life Jesus experienced was not like the life we experience. Our families and friends comfort us and tell us we do not go alone. Jesus' path is that of one walking that lonesome valley by Himself. I watch Kathy “playing with her house” as the years spin by, changing the decorations to match the season, now snowmen and Christmas trees, later spring flowers and bunny rabbits, then summer and fall. I watch her preparing for Thanksgiving, waving a wooden spoon and shouting at those who put up Christmas decorations before the turkey's done. In her beautiful, warm, smiling

face I see the comfort the whole family experiences from the regularity of the seasons, and her maintenance of the traditions we pass on to Kat and Ryan and I am content.

Jesus had none of that. The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, Matthew and Luke tell us. When we open Mark, we enter the world Jesus inhabited, one with no comfort, and we are called upon to leave our expectations behind if we are to understand the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Maybe that is, in the end, the reason Mark is so comfortless, for we are given hope by Jesus' acceptance of a comfortless life. Mark lets us see the world from Jesus' eyes so that we can know the price of the hope we hold. Our hope cost Jesus his life.

The hope Jesus gave us sustains us even though the world we find ourselves in offers little room for the val-

ues Jesus taught. We are told that the poor are given into our hands to care for, but the voices of the world tell us that the poor are so because they are lazy, or criminals, or addicted, and so fail to meet our expectations for those to whom we extend our charity. Mark's story of Jesus is filled with friends who abandon him, disciples who misunderstand him, authorities who murder him. Mark shows us clearly that none of these people meet our expectations of worthy people to whom to extend charity, but Jesus does.

We are told to love our neighbor as ourselves, but the voices of the world lock us into works of force, violence, and passion. We are told to love even our enemies, but the voices of the world demonize our enemies and whisper that they must be killed, to a man. Mark's telling of the story of Jesus shows us that even death will not halt the way, the truth, and the light, for the

truth will manifest itself.

We are told to love the Lord with all the force of our being, but the voices of the world whisper to us that such is impractical and unworkable, and must be moderated, as if there were realistic alternatives to the Word of God. Jesus walked with his eyes open to the cross in self-denying obedience to the sovereignty of God, and shows us that the way of God is not an alternative or an opinion.

Mahatma Gandhi believed that the truth has force to make itself manifest and he coined the word “Satyagraha” loosely translated as "insistence on truth" or "truth force" to express this.

Many years ago, Kathy and I found our house, which we loved at first sight. My dad came and looked. Engineer that he was, he pointed out that the house is situate in a bowl. Water, he noted sagely, runs down hill.

We were so in love with the house, though, that we believed the sellers when they told us that the house never flooded. We tossed Satyagraha, insistence on the truth, under the bus in pursuit of our desire for the house. Guess what happens every spring? Satyagraha – the force of truth – enters the house and pools in my study to remind us that we live in a world with rules that matter. So it is with the way that Jesus showed us — the way God would have us treat each other and His Creation. There is force of truth in God’s way. It will become manifest, though the forces of the world and its voices of practicality, greed, self-seeking and vengeance array themselves against it.

Like the disciples, pressing on to Jesus their expectations of who and what the Messiah would be, we press upon Mark our expectations of how the story must be. When we read from Mark, we cry, “Nooo! That’s not

how it goes.” But, yes, it does. In Mark we take up kingdom eyes and see that the voices of the world, to which we give such heed, do not speak the truth. The expectations of the world are not those of God.

It will be an exciting year, church, for this is but the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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