

Sermon Advent 2B  
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant  
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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.”

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*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,’”* In the wilderness, prepare a way, make straight a path, a highway for our God. Throughout the Bible, the people of God find themselves in the wilderness over and over again. The Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, Elijah fled to the wilderness, where he was fed by an angel to be fortified to finish his mission. Jesus himself fasted 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, and today, we hear that Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist, brought his message to the people out in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a wild and barren place, deemed unfit for human habitation. It’s a place in the Biblical narrative you’re more likely to encounter an angel or a demon, than another human being. The wilderness is not a destination, but, for sure, it has traditionally occupied a place as part of the journey for Bible Characters, and for many of us - a passage - difficult, but necessary. The wilderness is a place of movement - for God’s people toward the Promised Land for prophets and people along their faith journey, for the Exiled back home, and, Isaiah prophesies, it is also where God will make his move.

In the coming of the Messiah, God is on the move. In Christ, we see God is alive, active and he’s arriving to take up residence among his people in a way which would turn the world upside-down. And in preparation for this moment of divine movement, the Prophet Isaiah says, “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.”

The pathway for the Lord’s arrival will require a leveling of every rough place, every peak and valley, every “hill and dale.” When I was a kid, and I’d hear the phrase, “over hill and dale” I always wondered who was this Dale person? And why people were always running over him? Poor Dale... Later I learned that “dale” was just an old fashioned word for “valley.” We hear through prophecy that

this wilderness road has bearing on the whole world – that Christ’s reign isn’t just going to come over “hill and dale” it’s going to flatten hill and dale. Oh, Poor Dale! That guy can never catch a break!

God’s reign in Jesus comes to bring down the high places and to raise up the low. It will smooth out the rough and rocky patches And make straight a highway for our God’s saving work to enter into our midst. This cryptic prophecy is not about topography... It’s not about a public works campaign to fix the wilderness roadway. It’s about a rebalancing of power, a reversal of earthly with heavenly might about a return of God’s justice, it’s about exactly what we will hear Mary proclaim in the Magnificat when she says The Lord “casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly,” He “fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.”

It turns out, in the context of this prophecy, Dale isn’t a person...but the hills are! The “hills” and “mountains” that will be brought down are those who are seated high up on their thrones, people like Caesar, Pilate Herod and the religious authorities. Caesar resided on the Palatine Hill in Rome, Herod’s “Herodium” was perched high atop a hill in Galilee. Pilate’s throne sat high upon Mount Zion, right alongside the Temple, looking down over the wilderness where the Good News of Jesus Christ was announced by John. These are the mountains and hills that Jesus’ reign would bring low. These are the mighty, Mary says, who have been cast down in the presence of the lowly.

The Messiah comes to usher in a reversal that means TRUE MIGHT will be found among the meek, and TRUE STRENGTH among the peacemakers. And the rough places, that rocky terrain called life, in Jesus, they will all be rearranged, so that all those things that once stratified us, all that once separated us one from the other - the meek from the mighty, the Hills from the Dales would no longer stand in his kingdom. The coming of Christ means that our value no longer relies on how much power or privilege we have. In him, the Word made Flesh, the barriers that divide humankind are stripped away, and we are welcomed, and accepted, and loved as the children of God we are. He showed that time and again when he dined with sinners and outcasts, when he associated with lepers and tax collectors and women of ill repute.

And on the cross, as the temple curtain was rent in two, Jesus showed the final barrier he came to tear down was the one between heaven and earth, so that all people – not just the priests, the palace-dwellers or the privileged – would have access to the God who loves and created them. The kingdom Jesus ushers in sees and acknowledges the fundamental oneness of humanity as God’s beloved community, no matter how this world labels, discounts or judges us. To prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, to begin to level out the rocky terrain we inhabit, it to begin to open them to true unity and dignity of all people and to act in solidarity with the marginalized, targeted or forgotten.

I heard the story recently of a World War II veteran Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds. After he died, his son came across a newspaper article his father had kept hidden away for years. His father commanded the American 422nd Infantry Regiment in the war, and the interview was with someone who served under him and who had been captured with Sergeant Edmonds in battle and sent to a POW camp in Germany.

There in the Stalag POW camp, the Nazi guards had begun the practice of pulling the Jewish soldiers out of the camps and sending them off to concentration camps. One day, Sergeant Edmonds

was called on as the highest ranking American in the camp, to send all the Jewish soldiers out of the barracks. Instead of following these orders, Edmonds emerged from the barracks followed by every American in the camp. He stood before the Nazi commander, staring down the barrel of his gun, and said, “WE ARE ALL JEWISH HERE.”

With those words, that Sergeant Edmonds not only stood up against the enemy, but he stood up for unity, with no regard for his own safety, standing in solidarity with every man there, particularly those who were being targeted due to their religion or ethnicity. In this act, Edmonds nullified the divisions between them, he leveled the uneven terrain that existed between them, and in so doing, he preempted an act of violence. When the Nazi commander saw what he’d done, he turned in defeat, and simply walked away. By standing together as one, these men allowed light to triumph over darkness, even if for only a moment.

Ephesians chapter 2 says, “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Through the coming Christ, we are given the chance to be one, to give up on maintaining dividing walls and instead embrace kingdom peace. Instead of a topographical infrastructure project, The wilderness highway for our Lord is a mountain-moving campaign that will come to fruition in the hard work of solidarity – with the extremely difficult work of starting to see ALL PEOPLE as our brothers and sisters, as equals.

Maybe the road to Christ’s peace starts here, with you and me looking at one another, and seeing not as “other,” not a has or have-nots not as “liberal or conservative” not “black or white,” ...but first and foremost, as human, one of God’s beloved, as one for whom our Savior gave his life on the cross. The Way we prepare for the coming of the Lord will be made the way he modeled for us - not by edicts from on high, but by the humble and painstaking work of walking with the meek, accompanying the sick and the lowly, by slowly, gently, guiding and teaching, person-by-person, leveling a pathway through the wilderness to real and lasting peace.