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Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11 | Mark 1:1-8

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<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

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

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

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

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

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The beginning of Mark’s gospel is a bit odd, in my opinion. Chapter one, verse one says, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Then we have a lesson that doesn’t include Jesus at all. That’s odd. Instead of including Jesus, Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah, and then he introduces the reader to John the baptizer. Biblical scholars have a theory that says chapter one, verse one was intended by Mark to be the title of the book. According to this theory, the Isaiah quote was the intended start of the writing’s body,

rather than being verse two. If that theory is true, then the whole of Mark's gospel is called, "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That is a pretty good title, but it also means that Mark viewed his sixteen chapters as only the beginning of the gospel; the continuation of that gospel is found in your life and mine. I wouldn't blame you if you ruminated on that idea for the duration of this sermon, but I'm going to continue on to other points.

That first verse of Mark is also notable because it introduced for the first time ever a new literary genre, called a gospel. The word gospel is derived from the phrase of "good news" that Mark uses in this verse. Prior to this writing, there existed a genre of ancient biographies that were called bios. A bios was focused on depicting the goals, achievements, and failures of a hero. The bios genre had no concern about the person's childhood or events that may have shaped their development; the focus was entirely on the person's goals and accomplishments. The new genre Mark introduced was rooted in – yet also distinct from – the bios genre. The gospel genre that Mark began sought to declare that a new era has begun. The Christian gospels all proclaim that God has unprecedentedly entered human history, which inevitably changes everything. With the arrival of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven has dawned on earth. However, according to Mark's telling, before you proclaim him you must know about John the baptizer, and before John you must know about Isaiah.

The quote from Isaiah that Mark borrows to begin his gospel happens to be a portion of our first lesson today. In that lesson, Isaiah proclaims God's intention to visit the people in his own day. Many of the people of Judah had been taken captive by the Babylonian Empire, where they were held for around 70 years. In this passage, Isaiah is proclaiming that God is about to deliver them out of captivity and return them to the land of Judah. This wondrous deed of God requires a declaration be given; "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Who, though? Who is supposed to do this work of preparation? Is it the people that God intends

to visit? Is it God? In Isaiah, the answer is actually the servants of God, which include the prophet Isaiah himself, but also members of the heavenly realm. God's intent is not to arrive and deliver the people back to their homeland only after the people have done the work of preparing for the Lord's arrival. Instead, the point of God's declaration is that the servants – Isaiah and the heavenly helpers – had better prepare the way of the Lord, because God is going to visit the people whether they are ready or not. "Ready or not, here I come." With that in mind, hear the continuation of the passage as God's willingness to barrel through obstacles in order to embrace a lover: "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."

Mark is recalling that divine, ardent pursuit in order to convey a sense of urgency at the start of this gospel. God is coming, and someone must prepare the way of the Lord. Who? God's impassioned arrival is heralded by John the baptizer. Like Isaiah, John's proclamation takes place at a cusp. At this cusp is the closing of the time of promise and the beginning of the time of fulfillment. That special time between the two is ripe for the proclamation of good news. For Isaiah, this cusp occurred at the anticipated return from Babylon. For Mark, this cusp occurs at the beginning of a new era when Jesus enters this world. Take note of the grace that is found in both proclamations. Neither is saying, "God will come only to those who have prepared themselves. Everyone else will miss out." The proclamations are succinctly about the imminent arrival, the advent of God, and that this is good news for everyone. Once again, "Ready or not, here I come."

Of course, such an event is supposed to elicit a response. Upon such a declaration at the cusp of God's action, we are supposed to say, "This is amazing news! God is heading our way! What should we do to get ready?" When a new era begins – wedding, graduation, a birth, a journey – we always do something to prepare ourselves. What John the baptizer encourages for this new era is repentance: "get your lives turned around so that God's will

for justice, peace, and compassion is at the center, not your selfishness.” Why would we not want to do that? It is a good and holy experience to turn our gaze away from ourselves and instead focus on God’s will for justice, peace, and compassion in this world. Selfishness, however, urges us to remain selfish; to remain turned in on ourselves. When Isaiah, John, or Mark decrees that God is on the way in order to do something new, who wouldn’t want to repent? It might not sound like fun at first, but repentance actually can and should be exciting.

This isn’t a perfect analogy, but think of the game Hide-n-Seek. Most of the group finds separate hiding places while one person – “It” – must try to find them all. The concept of the game is pretty simple. However, why is it that kids and adults always find joy in this game? Think about it. If I asked my children if they wanted to go to a solitary location and sit there quietly for an unspecified period of time, they would view that as a punishment. Right? So what makes Hide-n-Seek enjoyable to play? The excitement isn’t in the hiding; the excitement is in the prospect of being found. We all want to be found, and that is what God is moving hills and raising valleys to do.

The Advent season asks us to ponder how God is willing to overcome the obstacles of hills and valleys in order to be with us. It asks us to ponder the passion of a God who is willing to enter this world, teach us a new way of life, overcome a state execution, and doing all of that in order to be faithful to us. We have hopes and longings for God, and God has hopes and longings for us. A longing to reveal to us and to all the people of this world that we are loved. May this Advent season be an opportunity to ponder our appropriate response to that love. And may our hearts and our lives be warmed by knowing that God seeks to be with us. “Ready or not, here I come.”

Amen.