

[title] Advent prepares the way

“Prepare the way” sounds a familiar advent theme. Mark’s Gospel, Handel’s Messiah and Godspell all use it to announce the beginning of an important story. Today’s Gospel introduces one of advent’s greatest figures, John the Baptist. He takes up the call relayed by Isaiah, preparing us for the coming of Christ.

John the Baptist prepares for Christ in many ways: He precedes Jesus in birth, in public ministry, and in death. So the very appearance of John tells us that Christ is coming, and his preaching provides a clue to the message Christ will bear.

The month of December is filled with preparations – from those in the kitchen to those in the classroom. Those preparations also belong in our heart, so the real meaning of Christmas won’t escape this year.

Note that today’s passage is not just “from” the Gospel of Mark, but is actually “the beginning” of Mark. Christmas romantics will miss the manger and angels here – they are not part of Mark’s story. But Mark’s opening message is no less important.

Mark’s is probably the earliest of the four Gospels. His is also the shortest. Did the others know more stories than Mark? We’re not sure. Mark may have known everything about Jesus that the other evangelists did, but simply chose to limit his Gospel to those stories which fulfilled his purpose.

Mark’s main purpose is to proclaim who Jesus is. We hear it in the very first line he wrote, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” Mark wastes no time with this densely-packed sentence. “The beginning” is the theme that starts the whole Bible (“In the beginning, God created. . .”), so Mark uses it to announce a major new beginning. “Good news,” or “Gospel” is a term Mark coins. Then, defining the good news, Mark tells us who Jesus is: the Messiah (the Christ), and the son of God. That first sentence is quite a mouthful.

But, since this is advent, our attention fixes on John the Baptist. He’s the reason we hear this passage on advent’s second Sunday. mark introduces John with a quote from Isaiah, the same passage we hear in today’s first reading. This part of Isaiah dates from Israel’s return from exile to its homeland. It announces the comfort of homecoming, rebirth, an end to suffering, and a new beginning of life. John, then, announces the same. Clad like Elijah, whose anticipated return was to accompany the last days, John is portrayed as a new prophet, or the last of the prophets, announcing the coming of the Messiah.

John is called “the Baptist” not because of his religious persuasion (!), but because he poured water on his new followers. Those who repented their sins and sought a new way of life came to John for a ritual rebirth.

For Mark, John foreshadows the ministry of Jesus, soon to make his entrance in the story. For us in Advent, John foreshadows our celebration of the birth of Christ.

Prophetic voices still arise in our time. Sometimes they proclaim glad tidings; other times they predict doom. In today's political arena, we've heard many voices claiming to be prophetic, surrounding issues like NAFTA, health care, and military intervention in Somalia and Bosnia. How do you decide whom to listen to? Do you form your political opinions based on matters of justice? How do you discern which prophetic voice is making straight the way of the Lord? Whom do these voices challenge?

As a church, we play the role of John the Baptist, announcing the coming of Christ to the broader community. In your parish, which ministries do this best? How would you define the main mission of your parish? Does it announce good news? If so, who's listening?

As Christmas approaches, we can each accept the mission of John by announcing the true meaning of this season. Do your Christmas traditions proclaim the sacred meaning of this feast? What's the message on your Christmas card this year? Are you buying religious or secular 29-cent stamps? Why? Do the decorations in your house announce the coming of Christ, or the coming of retailers?

John the Baptist stands up as a truly prophetic figure. He announces the coming of Christ, and challenges us to do the same. In our preparations for this season, we have the opportunity to emphasize the true meaning of the feast, by recognizing the prophetic voice around us and honoring the sacredness of the season.

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