

It was a parishioner in a wheelchair who really got my attention a few weeks ago. I was holding a parish forum after the weekend Masses and we were discussing improvements we hope to make to our building. One issue that came up is handicap accessibility. If you're in a wheelchair and want to come to St. Regis, and if able-bodied drivers haven't taken the handicap parking spaces, and if you find the one entrance to our church without steps, and if inside the church you have to go to the bathroom--God help you. I knew all that, but it was a parishioner in a wheelchair who got my attention. ^{He} ~~complained~~ ^{challenged me} about the ramp coming up to the church. It's too steep, and extremely bothersome in the rain. He said to me, "Father, I'd like you to get in a wheelchair and try it sometime."

If someone in a wheelchair talks about handicap accessibility, I listen. Well, we all would. We'd listen because there's something about the voice of someone who suffers. There's something about the voice of someone who's empty. There's something about the voice of someone in the desert.

We don't always hear it. Some who suffer silence their voice. They're depressed. They doubt they can help. They feel ignorant, weak, or unskilled. Inside they rage at the world, but outside they keep quiet instead.

We don't always hear the voice, but when we do, it shakes us to the core. "Remember Pearl Harbor." "Black is beautiful." "Just say no." Those who've suffered, those who've been there have a voice for the conscience of the world.

Mark's Gospel begins with a voice. Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but Mark begins his with a voice in the desert. The voice was John the Baptist. His voice was so strong that people remembered what he said. They even remembered little details about him--what he wore and what he ate. And they called him the Baptist, the one from the dry desert who came to the water and dipped people in. They remembered John because he lived in a desert. He lived in emptiness. He lived in suffering. There's something about the voice of one who suffers.

Mark's Gospel is a story of preparation. He begins with a prophecy of Isaiah, "make straight the way of the Lord." Isaiah prepared the way for John. John prepared the way for Jesus. And Jesus, ~~dying~~, prepares the way for us. It's like a relay race. And every Advent, Jesus passes the baton to us. It's our turn. Now we can prepare the way for others, to help them in their suffering.

The temptation is to turn down the invitation, to say, "I can't do my turn, I'm suffering right now." But it's precisely those who suffer who have what others who suffer need, those who suffer have a voice, a voice of experience and wisdom, a voice that challenges.

Mark's Gospel begins with these words: "This is the beginning of the Good News." And where does the Good News begin? Not in a condo, not in a palace, not even in Raytown. The Good News begins in the desert. If you're in the desert this Advent, the Good News begins with you.