

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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How many of you love the stories about Jesus' birth? I love them. They are interesting and rich and wonderful. They capture the imagination and speak of God's deep desire to be with us. I've heard those narratives throughout my life and they have never grown stale. For these stories begin to help us know who this Jesus was and what his mission would be. They start to show us a bit of who God is. I am so thankful that Luke and Matthew began their gospel accounts with these nativity stories.

But the Gospel according to Mark does not include any accounts of a young pregnant teenager or of her confused fiancé. It doesn't tell about angelic visits or a crowded Bethlehem or a baby being placed in a manger. There are no descriptions of shepherds or magi or of stars that guide, and in it, we find no dramatic account of King Herod trying to kill a royal baby. And yet, this passage in Mark, without anything about Jesus' birth, is used as part of the Advent lectionary as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus. How does an account about John the Baptist help us in this season of waiting and preparation?

In Mark's account, note that we get a similar clear message as comes to us in the nativity narratives that this Jesus is no ordinary Joe showing up on the scene. The one who delivers that message is an odd kind of character, whose described attire and diet give indication that John the Baptist is a prophet who is telling those who will listen what God is up to. All sorts of people had been coming out to hear him preach and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. But John declares that there was someone else who was coming from God, whom he, even as a prophet, would not feel worthy to carry out a servant's role of taking off that person's sandals. He doesn't discredit the task he had of baptizing folks in water, but this One who was coming would immerse them in the very Spirit of God.

Indeed, this was to be a special encounter for which the people needed to be prepared. We talk about Advent being a season of preparation. We prepare for

what lies ahead and yet the birth of Jesus is long since past. So is there really anything ahead of us for which we are preparing? We, of course, prepare for the season of Advent and for Christmas itself. You see some of that in the decorations here in the sanctuary. They indeed are beautiful and they remind us that something special happened in the coming of Jesus into our world. But is this really a season of expectation and preparation? Is there something that's going to happen to us in the time ahead or are we just celebrating something that happened a long time ago?

A writer named William Boggs tells about a time one summer when he and his family were driving in South Carolina when they came upon a "You Pick" peach orchard. He writes, "I doubt any bargain would be sufficiently attractive enough to lure me out of my air-conditioned car into a steamy afternoon to pick fruit, but we pulled over, paid our money and selected a bushel basket to fill with fresh, ripe South Carolina peaches. As we set off into the orchard, an old fellow, as wrinkled as a peach pit who was tending the place said, 'If you want the best fruit, go deeper into the orchard; the peaches on the fringes are picked over, but deeper in, you'll find the best fruit.' So, we walked a ways and figured we had gone far enough. We set the basket down, but the old man hollered, 'Go deeper.' So, we picked up the basket and went a little farther and then when we started to pick, the man said again, 'No, go even deeper...the best fruit's farther in.' Once more, Boggs and his family picked up their basket and walked a little further, thinking they were surely deep enough and as they finally felt like they had gone as far as they could, the old man hollered once more, 'Go on. Go deeper.' And so we did, right into the midst of the orchard, and we found the old man was right - the finest, plumpest peaches were untouched and waiting for us." ¹

There are plenty of ways to get immersed in the religious or the secular observances of this season we are in. A lot of the Christmas festivities are fun, and it makes sense for the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior to be joyful. But there are also voices that tell us that celebration, by itself, is simply not enough, that preparation for Christmas Day's gift giving and decorating and hosting of family and friends can be a missed opportunity. If we understand that we are preparing for someone and not something, then we will want to go to a deeper level in our preparation.

That's why John the Baptist shows up at this time of year. Many of the people in his day thought that God had done great things in the past. But did they think God was going to do something special in their day? John told them to prepare to experience God's presence in a new and powerful way. And that's his message for us as well. If we are only celebrating what God did a long time ago, then John would tell us to reorient ourselves to see things differently. He used the word, 'repent,' which in the original language means 'turn around,' so movement in a new direction can be possible.

Mark's Gospel includes John the Baptist referring to our earlier reading from Isaiah, a passage that also calls for preparation for God's coming. That preparation goes well beyond just tidying up a bit. We can't really move heaven and earth in preparation, but if heaven is on the move, then moving earth is the appropriate figurative preparation. A version of the passage from Isaiah puts it this way: "Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God. Fill in the valleys, level off the hills, smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks."² It's not small changes that are needed – major landscaping is described. Some mountains within our lives need to be brought down – mountains of materialism or indifference, or the high levels of maneuvering so that important people think highly of us need to be hauled off. There are also some low areas that need to be brought up – our low down hopes and expectations that God really is going to do something new in our midst. There are also some societal highs and lows that need to be leveled out with the extreme distance between those who are living high, the rich and powerful, in comparison with those who are poor and ignored.

Isaiah and John the Baptist call to us to not settle for just celebration or for surface preparation. They, along with a fellow at the peach orchard say, "Go deeper." For there is One who not only came long ago, but One who is coming anew, who wants to work powerfully and tenderly. Let us focus on the One for whom we are preparing, and then we will want to go deep. And he will want to immerse us in the very Spirit of God. It could be an adventurous Advent!

¹William Boggs, Sin Boldly: But Trust God More Boldly Still (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 101-102.

²Eugene H. Peterson, The Message, Old Testament Prophets (Navpress Publishing Group, 2000).