

## **While we wait**

Menno Mennonite Church

December 10, 2023

**Purpose:** To consider the strategies of active waiting that attend our anticipation of the coming kingdom.

**Message:** As people of the kingdom, we are invited to the attractive, active waiting of behaving in anticipation of the way of the kingdom

**Scripture:** Mark 1:1–8; 2 Peter 3:8–15a

**Synopsis:** Waiting is not our most comfortable state. It does not take a great deal of time or change to go from patience to fidgeting. The time between how things are and how we want them to be can seem an almost unendurable period, and an insult to our efficiency and values if inflicted from the outside looking in. Our culture and our devices have put us to work to maximize all time as productive or at least entertained.

As we hear again the invitation of John to anticipate the one who will come next, we are reminded that our waiting here too is not meant to be idle. There is an urgency that calls us from our routines and disrupts the ordinary as we are invited to engage the freedom of what will be in the coming kingdom now. John invites us to the work of turning that which must change now even as we wonder how long the Lord might wait.

## Mark 1:1-8

1 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.”

Stories are important. And we love a good story. Imagine with me that it is your turn for story time at the local library for the Kindergarteners. Never mind if it your thing or not. Imagine being at the front of the class with a whole brood of ready faces looking up to you to be told the story. You hold up the book: *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. You begin:

*Once upon a time there was a girl named Goldilocks who was fast asleep in a lovely bed nice and snug and just right for her. She woke up and opened her eyes and stretched her arms and tried to wake herself up, only to have 3 bears staring—right—at—her. She was naturally scared out her wits, jumped out of bed and ran in her pajamas out of the house and through the forest which is where she had the a real adventure finding her way home again. The end.*

How do you think that would go? Let me tell you, this would not end well for you. Those lovely faces would almost certainly darken with scowls and frowns, and if you were able to make it to the end of your version of the story without being interrupted (highly unlikely) you will quite soon know that this is not how this goes. You didn't start at the beginning. You missed the good part—you forgot the porridge and the chairs, and it just doesn't make sense any way. Start over and tell it right. Take it from someone who has been occasionally known to entertain myself by bungling a few lines of the stories on purpose or trying to move things along with the cliff notes version of *Green Eggs and Ham* seldom do I actually get away with it. If the kids had been drifting to sleep, they are wide awake now telling me to do it right and go back to the page I skipped.

*“The Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”.*

That's where Mark starts it off and before we have even had time to figure out whether that was the title, and introduction or just a bullet point we are all the way back to Isaiah centuries earlier, speaking of that which we do not know. In this advent season (which is something we really only insist on here at church—it is Christmas time and we all know it) we know that this is not the story that we know and love—some scruffy prophet calling in the wilderness and speaking about our sins. That's not the story. It is not even fitting for the season. Go back and tell us about Mary and Elizabeth, with the annunciation of good tidings of great joy from angels heard on high. It is lacking the poetic flair of “In the beginning was the word...” Even Matthew's ponderous genealogy of Jesus son of Joseph is better than this. Like a grade schooler when you are not reading things correctly and not showing the pictures, we are given to

object. It is Christmas and the last place we want to be is in the wilderness and the last thing we want to hear is anyone asking us to consider the need for repentance. It doesn't quite seem right.

Mark is the one whose work and way is clear—he is here to tell the story of Jesus and clearly and concisely as possible that we might know the good news. His is the gospel that tells the essentials quite often at almost break-neck speeds. If you read it, you will note that everyone is doing everything *immediately* and getting on with it. The greatest story ever told must be told and Mark is not going to dink about with it.

Mark begins his story where it must, not where we wish it might. He begins the story of Jesus the Son of God not with a baby meek and mild but a prophetic voice who is anything but. He begins with the world as it is which can at times be a good thing. Because it declares that even in the places we find ourselves, where ever we find ourselves, there too God will come. John's message links us to Israel's past, his dress and demeanor speaking of the redemption story they knew well. The time of Israel in the wilderness was a time in between. Think of it: they were saved from slavery, but not yet delivered to the place promised them. There was a lot of work to be done there. It was a time of learning to grow in faith and change. They had to be refined time and again through their efforts to build their faith their way and to seek their idols and the opportunity to repent along the way. It was a time that developed the trust in God where they had to let go of much—the crying for food, the pleas to just go back and be slaves again, the need control all things—in order to pick up that which is new. If that doesn't smack of advent I don't know what does.

In order to take in the good news, we must start with the way things are first. We need to be awakened to our hunger and thirst for something new in order for that then to be filled. Have you ever wondered about John the Baptist? I mean the images that we are given here are not terribly pleasant—a man rough in appearance and in manners, harkening back to Elijah and all that. Yet we are told by all the Gospels that those who heard him and with whom he prepared the way that the whole of the population went out to see him and to receive the baptism that he offered. The obvious question is of course why? What makes it so essential that this is the beginning of the story?

Maybe it was this sense of wilderness being this space of advent, and space of invitation as much as it is about waiting. John's message was calling people back to the story that had long been told, the story of YHWH and YHWH's people existing in and for each other. John's

baptism of repentance invited people to take seriously the brokenness of the world as it is where we know well the failures of ourselves to love God as well as we might, to love ourselves and graciously as we could and to love our neighbors as honestly as we are able and to hold it up before a loving God. They are invited to reconnect to the promise of a God that would not let them go even when things seem so wrong. Sometimes I wonder what we miss that we do not hold confession as part of our sacramental lives not because I covet the insight into the juicy details of our congregational lives and living, nor seek the power to grant or deny absolution to anyone. But I do think we miss the power in having a means and purpose in speaking that which burdens us out loud and forthrightly, be it impossibly huge or utterly mundane, and in confessing hear what we so often must hear the most: in the name of Jesus the Christ, you are forgiven. There is freedom in that, and huge hope.

John's baptism was steeped in the promises of God and the expectations of being part of what God wills for us and our world. Yet as a human affair it was intrinsically incomplete. John prepares the way for the new way that Jesus is ushering in and it is incumbent on us to take it on. Jesus' baptism is that of the Holy Spirit, a baptism that fulfills the whole of what is to become, but it is one that does not come to us without our on some level seeking it along the way. The gift of beginning with repentance in hand is that it prepares you to seek the savior along the way. If you don't begin with an awareness for the need for change in ourselves or in the world we might not know what our need are when Jesus does comes to us. There is a reason why plumbers don't ply their trade by going door to door. You only need a plumber when you *know* you need a plumber and rarely much before that. Were one to show up unlooked for and unanticipated you would likely show them the door right quick. In the same way, John makes us mindful of the needs that we all have and let's us know that the corrosion of our metaphorical pipes is something that we likely want to do something about sooner rather than later. It prepares the way for the one who will not only truly fix what is there but change the whole system top to bottom.

Mark's beginning prepares us for that next thing that is there. It also let's us know that there is something else going on here than solely the beginning that we want with a baby away in the Manager and the ponderous wonderful mystery of all things coming together just as the Angel had spoken them. It means that the stuff of the nativity as welcome as it is constitutes only the prelude of the story and not the story itself. The point of the story is not that a baby was

born of Mary in mysterious wonderful circumstances but that this is the one who will bring all that God intends into full and final focus in the fullness of time. It is this one who would experience all that the world had to offer, indeed the worst that the world has to offer and says that even here repentance is possible and the way of the creator will be the way of the world.

We need John's call to remind us that we do not wait in vain hope nor without present preparation. We are part of the kingdom now, and we are welcomed to the work of the kingdom already here and now even as we wait for its full dawning. We are invited into the freedom of confession, resting assured in God's love, and doing the work of repentance—of turning what is wrong toward what is right. We wait but in the meantime we are actively part of what God is doing all around us, come what may. We do the works of caring for those who need care, of extending mercy where it is least expected, of living fully the calling of the gospel not to make us good, but to bring about the kingdom on earth as it is heaven even while we wait.

The beginning reminds us that God's love reaches us where we are and as we are. But it does not leave us there. It calls us time and again to the work of what lies at the center: doing the things of God in the name of healing the nations. If we forget that this is what we are really waiting on, if we forget what the full core is about, then the gospel story will hold no power than a fanciful tale of talking bears and overly curious little girls.

May we be about the work of the meantime, and hear God's invitation to all things new time and again.