



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Longing for Light...We Hear Good News

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 7, 2008

Second Sunday in Advent (Year B)

Mark 1:1-8

Dr. Ramsay was one of my professors in college and he was one of the most amazing people I ever knew. I learned so many things from him. One of those things was to listen for repeated words and phrases when trying to figure out what a particular passage of scripture was saying. While I've found that to be helpful over the years, I've also discovered a wider application. I often listen for repeated words and phrases being used by those around me, and here's what I've been hearing lately:

As I walked from the elevator in the hospital to the parking lot, I found myself talking to a stranger who was going through a rough time. When she learned that I was a pastor, here's what she said: "I go to church every week. I try to sing—but I can't. I try to pray—but I can't find the words. I try to affirm what we believe—but the words just won't come out."

I was seated in the corner at the coffee shop across town, when I began to overhear the conversation between two men seated at the table beside me. As one listened, the other poured out his heart, describing how his children were struggling with pressure in unhealthy ways, and that his wife was growing distant. And then he said this: "Is this all there is? Is this what it's supposed to be?"

I was talking with someone else who by all accounts is doing great, but here's what she told me: "I get so beat up at my office during the week that I wouldn't make it without church. Sunday worship is my life-line."

Another word has been on countless lips around me: "The economy is killing me. I don't know if I'll have a job next month. And I don't know what we're going to do if things don't turn around soon."

The repeated words and phrases reveal a bleakness that reveals we are wandering in the wilderness. We are longing for light...but we wait in darkness. We are longing for light...and today, Mark tells us, we finally have some good news.

There's a voice crying out in the wilderness. Can you hear it? There's a voice of one reminding us that God is on the way, and that God is going to set things right. Do you hear it?

It's hard to hear, because we've forgotten where Advent begins—not in the manger, not in the field where shepherds listened to the angel choir; not in the Temple when Simeon sees the fulfillment of God's promise.

No, Advent/Christmas begins where those voices I've been hearing lately are standing. The hope of Advent begins in the wilderness. Do you hear it?

Like most people, I find Handel's *Messiah* to be such an important part of my Christmas celebration. I especially love the first words, where the tenor makes his way to center stage and finally sings, "Comfort ye. Comfort ye, my people," and then he moves

into “Every valley shall be exalted.”

I love those opening words, but those aren’t the first sounds you hear. That’s not how the Messiah begins, because Handel knew that John and Isaiah before him spoke to those in the wilderness. And so the Messiah doesn’t begin with the voice—it begins with the overture from the wilderness.

(Our organist plays the opening measures of the overture here.)

Did you hear that? If we want to understand the voice of Isaiah’s poetry through the voice of John the Baptist, then we’ve got to know that this poetry only makes sense in the context of the wilderness—a place of crooked paths and high, un-scalable mountains and dark un-reachable valleys.

That’s where we are—in the wilderness. And we are waiting for the good news that has been announced to come true. These days before Christmas afford us all sorts of opportunities to wait. There’s the simple waiting between seeing a gift with our name on it under the tree and waiting to open it.

There’s the joyful waiting between receiving an invitation to spend time with your family on Christmas and feasting that day.

There’s the anxious waiting between purchasing that perfect gift for your child and waiting to see his expression when he tears into it on Christmas morning.

But, if we dare to be honest, we are also waiting between other things. And that waiting isn’t so joyful. It’s a wait that happens in the barren places of our souls.

There’s the waiting between biopsy and diagnosis.

There’s the waiting between sending a child in the military overseas and his coming home.

There’s the waiting between an end to conflict in Iraq and peace.

There’s the waiting between the birth of a Savior for all the world and the establishment of his kingdom of justice and peace.

There’s the waiting between making an investment and watching the economy rebound.

There’s the waiting between Friday and Sunday, between death and resurrection.

That’s the church’s cycle of waiting. We tend to be Saturday people, living between the death of God on Friday and the resurrection of God on Sunday. Enduring the long Saturday when nothing seems to be happening and it seems as if all that we’re hoping for and praying for and longing for won’t ever happen. Sometimes it seems as if these promises of God aren’t going to come true, as if the mountains will only get higher and the valleys will only get lower. Sometimes it seems as if God isn’t on the way at all, and that we’re left alone to wait, and there’s little left for which to hope.

That type of waiting is hard work. And, if we’re honest, it can shake our faith to the core.

In one of his prayers, Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann looks at the world groaning for redemption and exclaims, “No wonder there is fear, reams of despair, and acres of weeping!” He goes on to ask God to help us who feebly watch and wait to learn how “to weep while we wait, and how to hope while we weep, and how to care while we hope.”

“To weep while we wait.” “To hope while we weep.” “To care while we hope.”

That’s what this season of Advent is for. Advent begins in the pain and loss of the wilderness, in the barren places, in the darkness, and suddenly, unexpectedly, God breaks in to set things right.

But to cling to that hope as we wait and weep means to go against everything that surrounds us. It is to affirm against all evidence to the contrary that there is a reason to trust in God.

Poet Ann Weems, upon the death of her son, penned some lines in which she pours out her heart in lament before God. And, in a way, she captures what many of us feel. She writes:

*“I stand at your empty table, O Holy One, and ask to be fed.
But there is no bread, no wine, no priest.
Is there no one to minister to me?
Is there no place at your table for damaged hearts and scarred souls?
Do you not invite everyone who believes?
I believe. O God, I believe.
In spite of an empty table, I believe.
In spite of those who laugh at me as I wait for you, I believe.
In spite of the evidence to the contrary that they scream in my face,
I will stand at your empty table,
And wait until you come, Your arms full of bread,
The wine splashing as you walk.
Come, O Holy One, and feed me.”* (from *Psalms of Lament*)

That’s sort of the message that John announces in the wilderness. When he begins to preach, he recalls for a people literally in the barren place the hope of which Isaiah had preached long before. It was of how God was going to come and save them. If you remember, Isaiah preached to a people languishing in exile. They thought God was done with them. They thought that God couldn’t even get to them in their captivity. And they knew that even if God did want to come to them, the way was difficult, filled with mountains and valleys that made travel difficult.

But Isaiah boldly announced: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Nothing was going to keep God away.

Not the highest mountain. Not the lowest hill. Not the most crooked path. Nor the roughest way. Not the worst diagnosis. Not the longest war. Not the worst economy. Nothing is going to keep God away. It was as if the whole world was preparing for the end of the waiting, as God was ready to draw near.

Several years ago my friend Chris Joiner and I went to the mountains to hike. We ended up on the Bear Fence Rock trail. If you’ve not been on it, you’ve missed a treat. You go up and over one pile of rocks after another, always thinking that surely you’re at the peak. It’s a great hike with amazing views.

But it’s rugged. Chris and I kept thinking, “We’re going where no one’s been be-

fore.” Our pride in our accomplishment reached a great height, only to be brought low when a young girl led her family of four past us in the other direction.

When we reached the end of the trail, a choice loomed before us. Would we go back over the rocks, or take the gentle stroll along the level trail that circled below? We chose the level trail and were amazed to find ourselves back at the beginning so soon. It had taken much effort and time to go out, but it was easy coming back.

That’s the way Isaiah and John picture it. The whole creation is preparing a highway for our God. The hills will be made low and the valleys will be lifted up. The crooked will be made straight and the rough places plain.

It’s a reminder to me, and to us, that even though all places are not prepared, even though all flesh has not yet seen, God is even now at work in the world for wholeness and peace. Even now God’s kingdom is alive and we catch glimpses of it from time to time. And we rejoice that God already draws near to save even as the valleys and hills are being reshaped.

These days of waiting are not easy. But the promise is sure. These days of waiting are coming to an end. Even now, God is on the way, drawing near to save. The night is far gone; the day is near.

Comfort ye. Comfort ye, my people. Every valley shall be exalted and every hill made low. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.” May that day come soon for us who wait, for us who are longing for light.