

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Prepare the Way

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

- ¹ Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
- ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
- ³ A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
- ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
- ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
- ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
- ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
- ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings,^[a]
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[b]
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
- ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
- ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Gospel Lesson

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Bible/Sermon Focus

This season of Advent is different than those past because of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are in a wilderness time as a people. Our sense of “normal” is all turned around. Our holiday plans are not going to look like they did in years past. This Advent is different. This year the season of Advent is happening in its true Biblical location - the wilderness.

Of all of the liturgical seasons, Advent may even reflect our current situation better than the others. Because of the pandemic we are in a season of waiting, a liminal season. And, Advent is a season of waiting, a liminal season as well.

Advent is an *entire* season of liminal space - waiting and preparing for the arrival of the Messiah. We wait for God to disrupt the status quo. To break into history, through the coming of the promised Messiah, and to do so in a way that disrupts the expectations of how that Messiah will come into the world. God surprises us with who God chooses.

In our sermon for this week we heard that there are those who believe that there is only one best way to access God, that there is only one kind of “good” Christian and the others are somehow lesser. This is not a new thing in religion and is indeed not limited to Christians. Even in the time of Jesus there were ideas about who the “good” Jewish people were. Nazareth, the place where Jesus grew up was considered a pretty lower-class place.

But God disrupts things. God disrupts our expectations of how God will enter the world. God disrupts our ideas about what a “good” or “chosen” people look like, and who they are. And our sermon this week challenged us to lean into the idea that it is perhaps not the normative way of being that God uses.

This Advent, is different. It will not look like it has in the past and our lives are disrupted. But, it is in the liminality that we may see the wonderful way that God does the unexpected in our midst.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you have a favorite Christmas sweater? Please describe it!
2. How has the season of Advent been simplified for you this year?
3. How is Advent like the wilderness, as described by Rev. Andy Bryan:
"the wilderness is a place of freedom; free from rigidly defined structures. Free from prescribed normativity. Empty of luxury, empty of pretension, empty of privilege, empty of all but what is right in front of us."
4. Mediate and share your feelings on this quote from Mennonite Pastor, Jamie Arpin-Ricci:
"One of the deadliest tools of powerful systems is narrow definitions of what is 'normal' and the reduction of difference to deviance."
5. Read Genesis 11:1-9. This is the story of the Tower of Babel. Like the other Primeval stories in early Genesis (Creation, the Garden of Eden, Cain & Abel, Noah & the Flood, and the Tower of Babel) this story is about the people trying to be God or like God. They are building a literal tower to the heavens to put themselves where God is. How does the people's "sameness" play into this story? Is their sin their "sameness" or what they do with it? Please make room in your discussion for different opinions.

Prayer

Oh God, In this wilderness season, help us to be a people who truly prepare the way of the Lord, so that...

every valley can be exalted, and Babel's towers be made low...

the uneven ground can become a level place of freedom for all people...

the glory of the Lord will be revealed and ALL people shall see it together...

Amen.

"It is fascinating to see how people respond when all they have is right in front of them. In the wilderness, free from the expectations of the world, when things have been simplified for us, we confront ourselves and in so doing, discover who we really are."