

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Second Sunday of Advent – Year B – December 10, 2017

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There's an app called *Calm* that I have recently installed on my phone—it's Apple Store's 2017 App of the year. Whenever you open the app the message, "Take a deep breath" appears. I was curious about what the 2017 App of the year was like. There are many options of music and images that calm one's being—soundtracks of raindrops on leaves or crashing ocean waves, apparently guided meditation, whimsical sleep stories (i.e. bedtime stories for adults). It seemed like another way to calm the soul for this Advent season. Maybe you've tried it out.

Mark's Gospel in a sense is a "take a deep breath" gospel, beginning with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (Mark 1:1). Take a deep breath, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." We yearn for good news in our time just as the people of Jesus' time yearned for it. Then Mark's gospel writer takes us back to the prophet Isaiah—to words we just heard in our Old Testament reading. There's a messenger coming—one who will prepare your way: "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his pathways straight.'" (Mark 1:3). To understand the coming of Jesus and this messenger John the Baptist, Mark's writer looks back to the Hebrew Scriptures—to our Jewish roots. We can't really understand our Christian faith without looking back to our Jewish roots. Just as Israel needed to repent in Isaiah's time, so John the Baptist called people to

repent in Jesus' time and still calls us to repent. What does that mean for you?

We hear that John teaches and preaches and people come out to listen. They were hungry for valleys to be lifted up and for mountains and hills to be made low, for the uneven ground to become level. John had a message of repentance for the people and at the same time John clearly pointed to Jesus, the one coming after him. It's not all about John and how he gathers people, even though people came from everywhere to hear him—"from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." (Mark 1:5). We can only imagine the eloquence of John's words and yet Jesus is the one people wait for. "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." (Mark 1:7). Jesus is the one we wait for.

John invites us to look back and to look deep within ourselves as we prepare for the coming of Jesus. What are the rough places in us that need smoothing? What are the mountains and hills that need to be made low? What are the valleys that may need to be lifted up in us?

John is not the most endearing character to ponder as we think about waiting for Jesus. Who knows what he really looked like—maybe a little like the sketch on today's bulletin and maybe a little scarier. And yet people yearned for what they couldn't see. They yearned for a better time and for one who would usher light into darkness. The people walked long ways to hear this character John offer the hope of new beginnings.

Advent is a time to ponder the hope of new beginnings to each of us—to grasp this sense of preparedness about which John preaches. It's a time to take a deep breath whenever and wherever we can, knowing God will break into our world and set things right or turn them upside down. Jesus will come, and we need to be prepared.

Let us pray.

Spirit of truth
whom the world can never grasp,
touch our hearts
with the shock of your coming;
fill us with desire
for your disturbing peace;
and fire us with longing
to speak your uncontainable word
through Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

¹ Janet Morley, in *Celebrating Women*, ed. Hannah Ward, Jennifer Wild, and Janet Morley (London: SPCK, 1995), 70.