

Beginnings are important.

*“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* These are the first words we hear from Mark. It’s a beginning of a Gospel like no other. We are let into the story right away, given the secret right up front, or so it would seem.

But it appears we must wait just a bit longer. Mark first wants to give us some background. It seems the beginning is not what we might imagine and the first voice we hear is perhaps not the one we would expect, given that introduction.

John the Baptist, a strange man with even stranger eating habits, preaches a surprising kind of good news from the very outer edge of society. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, *“See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”* While we are looking forward to the Incarnation, John has us looking to the past, to the theological history and tradition of the Jewish people.

Isaiah foretold the coming of the Messiah and points us to the prophet Elijah, who like John, wore funny clothing, and spoke to the people of repentance for turning away from God. Elijah was the one who was to go before the Messiah to prepare the way. Mark is tying the past to the present; the prophets to the Messiah; all to the fulfillment of God’s promises and pointing to Jesus as the “Good News” of God’s kin-dom coming into the world.

Beginnings are important.

Prepare, make smooth, make straight the way.

We who live in New England are well acquainted with the highways that lead to our Northern towns. Just travel north anywhere and we can see the evidence of the granite that underlies our landscape, blasted away and removed to make a way for the relatively smooth roads we take for granted. And perhaps those roads are not necessarily straight, but we certainly will accept a few scenic curves in order to avoid climbing up hill after steep hill to get to our destination. With our pathways straight and get to where we are going with less effort, enjoying beautiful scenery along the way.

Isaiah is bringing the good news of God’s healing to people exiled from Jerusalem. The path he talks of straightening is the one that brings hope of protection and deliverance

from the God they felt had abandoned them. We hear this in the hymn that we share today. “Comfort, comfort, O my people.” It’s one of my favorites for Advent. Isaiah’s message is life-creating song of consolation to a dispersed people, isolated for nearly a generation from their home.

John’s invitation to baptism, a ritual washing common at the time in Jewish communities, called the people through repentance and confession into a new beginning. By invoking the prophet’s words, John is preparing them for what and who is to come.

It is the work of the soul, the work of the heart that John proclaims for us today. We might think of this time of Advent as only a period of waiting, of passive, prayerful preparation. And, indeed, there is that call to move inward, to be introspective as we wait for the Lord. And yet, there is a call to what I would call “active waiting”. God calls us in this time to be active in preparation for new beginning. Actively searching our souls, seeking truth, and confessing where we fall short of God’s commandment to love God and neighbor, and then, turning, reorienting ourselves toward a commitment to serve God and others.

In Advent, the Baptizer calls to us, pulling us from the very center of our settled lives to the outskirts, to the edges of the wilderness, and into the waters of renewal. Karoline Lewis puts it this way, John’s message is *“is a decentering of God’s good news which we find on the edges....of everything. Goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be....The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there.”*

At times we all can feel somewhat disoriented. This can be especially true as during these preparations for the holiday moments we come to look forward to as defining moments of the Advent and Christmas seasons. Perhaps we are missing someone who for various reasons won’t be with us this year. Our memories of blessed Christmases past both sustain us and bring to mind those who are no longer with us in this life. For me, my brother, David, my Dad, my Aunt Judy, and Bob’s mother, Clare have been on my heart in the past few days.

With our eyes focused on Christ, we are led to ask, “who else might be feeling the same?”

Where might God be calling us to make straight the path for someone at risk of isolation and loneliness?

Who have you not seen or heard from in the past few days or weeks? Give them a call. Drop them a line. When we aren't quite like ourselves, the receiver can feel like it weighs 100lb. A simple hello can smooth over the rough road of loneliness in someone's life.

Is there someone that isn't able to make it to the building for worship right now? Who might have difficulty with technology you could assist in getting to our worship services on-line? What seems easy to some of us can be daunting and downright intimidating to others. Admitting we need help is often the hardest thing.

Is there someone on our prayer list whose name you hear each week? Call and see how they are doing and let them know we continue to hold them in prayer.

Is there someone from whom you are estranged over differing opinions? Is there something simple you have in common that can open a door just a crack and lead to new beginning in relationship?

Yes, beginnings are important. Even the smallest of movements can become the start of meaningful journeys on paths just a little bit less crooked and steep.

We are on embarking on more new beginnings in here at Atonement. Soon our profile will be finished and the process of calling a new priest will be become a different kind of beginning from those we have experienced in last 18 months. Just as with the beginning of Mark's telling of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we may be looking back as well, remembering, and reflecting on the past. And then, as we turn our face to gaze toward the future, we can also be present in this day, with our feet and our heart grounded in the very soil and soul of this blessed community of saints in Westfield, actively waiting for the arrival of the One we know is with always and in all ways.

Amen.