

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

**PREPARING©
Advent 2**

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Good news!!! Mark begins his entire work by announcing it is good news!

We could use some good news, couldn't we? Seems almost everywhere we look, everything we read, we hear of news that is discouraging, frightening, even hopeless for some.

I meet people every week who have that sense of hopelessness and fear.

At this time of year, those of us who are able try to look over and beyond the news that isn't so good. We want Christmas to be that joyful, fun, magical time full of surprises and lots of good cheer.

We spend time and money decorating, finding just the right gifts for each of our loved ones; we wrap those gifts and put them under the tree, anticipating that special moment, that excitement, when the presents are opened. We look forward to the cries of delight and the twinkling eyes of the children. It is truly a wonderful time!

For many of us, we are at a place where, even if the bad news affects us in some ways, we are still able to shove it aside and not allow it to get in the way of the Christmas celebration. We are able to carry on with all the usual preparations.

But, for others, the news is too bleak, too sad, too frightening to overlook it. It affects them so personally, it is just not possible to ignore it.

Like the woman who came to the baby pantry, a mother of several children, who works long hours, but can't make ends meet. She can't keep up with the bills – heating, food, gas for the car, and diapers for the baby. She needed coats for her children. And on top of that, a loved one just died in an accident.

She's not one who can set the bleak, bad news of her life aside to create a false sense of Christmas joy.

There are so many others, some we may know – people among us who are struggling.

And now that I bring all that bad news among you, you are probably wondering just where that good news is!

But, believe me, there is good news this Christmas! Mark begins with "the beginning of the good news (the gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

It is good news for us today. It was good news in Jesus day. And it was good news for those who were the immediate audience for Mark – those who lived about 60 years after Jesus – who were under horrific oppression during the war, who were persecuted by the Romans; the beloved, sacred, holy place of worship – the temple in Jerusalem burned to the ground.

It might seem rather odd that Mark starts off, right after the proclamation of good news, with the image of an eccentric preacher, warning the people of judgment and telling them to repent of their sins.

John the Baptist was the kind of man whom I imagine would cause most of us today to turn and run the other way if we encountered him preaching on a street corner.

He wore clothes made of camel's hair; he ate locusts with a side order of honey.

I imagine him with piercing eyes and a fierce, commanding voice.

Repent!!! Repent, you sinners!!!

He even called the temple leaders “a brood of vipers.” “Snakes.” That takes bold courage, and John was just the person for that job.

But, instead of people running the opposite direction from John, people from all over Judea and from Jerusalem were flocking out into the wilderness to hear him preach and to be baptized by him. He was the fulfillment of a longing for the people – the arrival of renewed prophecy, which they hadn't seen in many, many years.

With a prophet – just like the Old Testament prophets – there was excitement in sensing that God was stirring things up, was finally moving among them, and was doing a new and wonderful thing.

Of course, John, the Baptizer was preparing the way for someone even more important, who was the real fulfillment of longing, just as the prophet Isaiah had prophesied. John was preparing the way for the long-awaited Messiah.

And maybe they weren't clear in just what that meant, and maybe Jesus wasn't quite what they expected – and sometimes I think he still isn't what we expect today – but it was good news, better news than they, or we, can really imagine!

Just like the people then, even today, we want our Messiah to keep all the bad news away from us, to not let it touch us, or hurt us.

We long for a Savior who makes our world safe and full of good and peaceful things. Yet still, there is hunger, pain, violence, war, sickness and death.

They wanted a Messiah who would overthrow the government; a king who would rule and reign in peace, in their favor, of course.

Where – you might ask – is this good news? And how do we get good news from the loud, fierce command from John to repent! Repent, you sinners!

But the joyous good news does come from that very command. It is because the Word became flesh; because God came to be among us that we dare actually approach God with our sins and that we can really believe we are forgiven and that we can have this amazing, personal relationship with God.

It is grace – pure grace – shown to us in this man named Jesus who modeled for us what kingdom living looks like; who loved us so deeply that we would sacrifice everything for us; who went to a cross to die and was laid in a tomb – dead. For us!

Where again, is this good news?

Does this sound more like an Easter sermon than a Christmas sermon? Well, it should. Mark present us with a the adult Jesus bursting into our lives – instead of the sweet babe in a manger – as sweet and wonderful as that is. And hold on, because we will get to that baby in the manger very soon.

In this Advent season, as we prepare our hearts and minds for something more than chestnuts roasting and stockings hung by the fire – we prepare ourselves for the good news of God bursting into our fragile, lives once again – just in the nick of time – not to sugar coat a temporary season – but to do as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed:

Comfort, comfort ye my people! Do not fear; for “Here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.”

The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light. On them light has shined.

This is the great good news – that there is hope for the hopeless. God himself joins you, sees you and knows right where you are in your desert moments of life. God knows the chill and the fear of parents watching over babies in the cold, bleak night of winter where heat is shut off, and food is hard to find. In fact, God knows what it is like to be the baby – homeless, vulnerable, dependant.

God knows what it is like to be in pain and grief, to be treated with scorn, looked down on, persecuted, to be poor, lonely and in grief.

Comfort, comfort, my precious people!

This is the good news of Jesus Christ, God's Son, who came, and who comes still to us today, right where we are – to comfort, to abide with us, to walk beside us, to love us, and yes, to forgive us and heal us. This is reconciliation and relationship with God, pure and beautiful.

Prepare the way for Christmas! Repent and come to know the renewal, the precious, amazing grace that comes with forgiveness and new life. Prepare the way, by coming to know your Savior in a new relationship this year. Prepare for Christmas by opening your hearts and surrendering your lives anew, making a renewed commitment to follow and to be a John the Baptist.

You don't have to wear camel hair clothing and eat locusts either! Just tell others about your own experience of new life – give others the same good news that you have received.

Give the invitation to others and meet them in their wilderness – in the desert of their lives. Give them the fulfillment of their deepest longing – the good news of God's love. This is how we prepare for Christmas. This is the joy to the world that we sing when we see that sweet baby in the manger each year.

This is very good news indeed!

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