

Mark 1:1-8

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

As it is written in 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:

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

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

Today’s Old Testament Lesson...

is written to those who have separated themselves from God...
through their unfaithfulness and/or indifference.

In other words, it is written to people like you and me.

The people being addressed in the lesson were Jews in exile.

In their arrogance, they had forgotten how much they relied on God.

They became unfaithful and indifferent to God...
and were, thus, vulnerable to their enemies.

The Babylonians came/captured all of their lands,
forcing them to live in Babylon (modern day, Iraq).

There, they felt isolated/alienated/lost: they felt like strangers in a strange land.

They found themselves cut off from God and estranged from one another.

Of course, God had every right to leave them there, in their pain/confusion.

After all, they were the ones who turned their backs/went their own way.

Now they were simply facing the consequences...
of unfaithfulness/indifference.

But though they deserted God, God would not abandon them.

God tells the prophet Isaiah to *Comfort, O comfort my people.*

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her... that her penalty is paid.

Then, a voice from heaven cries out to Isaiah:

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

God is coming to rescue the exiles!

But there are preparations to be made: Isaiah must first lay the groundwork.

He is to prepare the path down which the Lord will travel,
a path in the wilderness.

Obviously, the people cannot return to their homes and stay in Babylon.

They must leave the security/city and go into the wilderness.

There God will meet them and lead them back to the Holy City, Jerusalem.

Note that Isaiah is to create a highway in the desert, not a stairway to heaven.

The road to salvation leads through the wilderness not down streets of gold.

Isaiah is not to sell them on glittery dreams but to deal out harsh realities.

This is how you can tell a real prophet from a charlatan:

Charlatans tell you what you want to hear; Prophets tell you what you need to know.

When Isaiah asks what he should tell the people,

he is told to remind them that though people are unconstant, changeable as grass,
the Word of God stands forever.

In other words, they are to put first in their lives that which lasts.

After the preparations are complete, then the people have to proceed into the wilderness.

It's not enough for them to hear the Word of God: they must live it.

They must take those first steps away from the crowd...

and venture out into the unknown.

Babylon was the height/culture in Isaiah's day, but it was a city that did not know God

Isaiah was calling the people out of their comfort zones...

and into that which terrified them.

But they would not be out there alone:

it is in the wilderness that God promised to meet them.

More than that, God promised to gather and feed them/carry and lead them...

like a shepherd gathers, feeds, carries, and leads his flock.

The God who comes like a mighty warrior treats the people like beloved lambs.

The Jewish people were restored to their land thanks to the one whom God sent:

the Persian king, Cyrus.

God led them through the desert and brought them safely home.

OK, so what about us? In our modern arrogance do we forget how much we rely on God,
putting our trust in ourselves/other people, in human science/technology/institutions?

Does our arrogance cause us to become unfaithful/indifferent?

And do we then fall prey to our enemies...

when we turn from the God who protects us?

Have you ever felt isolated/alone, cut off from others and from God?

Have you ever felt out of place, like a stranger in a strange land?

Where is our prophet, the one to lead us out of exile and back where we belong?

Our prophet is the one sent to the Jewish people 2,000 years ago: John/Baptist.

Like Isaiah, John was sent...

to prepare the way for the one who'd deliver the people from exile.

Like Isaiah, John's message was harsh:

leave the city and its ways and come into the desert.

This time, though, it was the one who came...

who paid the price to release the captives.

And the price was so steep (the deliverer's very life)...

that he paid for all future exiles, for us.

B/c of Christ's sacrifice, we are all free to go.

But we must go: we must leave our city, our comfort zones,
and venture out into our wildernesses.

Like the Jewish people in Isaiah's time,
we must put first in our lives that which lasts: the Word of God.
And, like them, we must do more than just hear the Word:
we must put it into action.

We must take those 1st steps away from the crowd/venture out into the unknown,
For, how can we ever reach Jerusalem if we won't leave Babylon?

Do you really think that John/Baptist and Jesus Christ gave their lives...

so that we could sit here quietly in our pews each week, worshipping safely,
giving of ourselves/our time/our possessions only so much as is comfortable,
and staying involved only when it is pleasant for us?

How could we ever be transformed by the Word, freed from our bondage,
if we insist on things always being safe/comfortable/pleasant?

Change only comes through taking chances/pushing the boundaries/sacrificing.

We are to pick up our cross and follow Jesus,
not sit with the crowds watching the parade!

We are called to walk into the wilderness,

but we are assured that we will never be out there alone,

God has promised to shepherd us if we will follow:

to gather us together with our sisters/brothers in the faith,
feed us when we're hungry,

carry us when we need it, and lead us where we need to be.

But we have to trust in our shepherd completely.

Lambs who try to go their own way get lost and put themselves in peril,
those who never go out into the pastures starve and atrophy.

Only those who trust their shepherd thrive.

We've all faced wilderness times in our lives:

times when we were frightened, unsure of ourselves, lost;

some of us may be going through such times now.

Though they may be painful, these are the times when we grow most.

We learn more about ourselves/our friends/about what matters to us at these times.

We learn how reliant on God we really are, and how much God can be trusted.

It's a great paradox that what we crave most as we get older, security,
is also what most prevents us from learning, from growing.

The security of Babylon is a delusion:

we are in the most danger when we seem most secure.

As Christians, we're called to enter into places where our only security...

is the shepherd's promise to care for us until we reach Holy Jerusalem.

This Advent season,

let us remember that the Xmas star always leads us off to adventure!