

Is. 40:1-8; Jer. 23:5-6; Zech. 9:9-10; Hag. 2:6-9; Is. 35:1-6; Luke 1:26-35, 38; Mark 1:1-15

“Believe in the good news”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas – decorations, music and the good news of Jesus Christ announce the nearness of God’s kingdom. Advent is a season of watching and preparing for the coming of the Messiah, Christ Jesus. This is a season in which, through the richness of scripture and music, we are given a vision of hope for this world. Advent helps us step back from the cultural Christmas, with its relentless commercialism, so that once again we might return to the incredible message of God’s love for this world. Today’s readings and music encourage us with good news of God’s grace, restoring human community in the wilderness of a broken world.

During Advent, prophets like Isaiah continue to speak to us, saying, *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.”* And, the prophet Jeremiah writes of a time that is *“surely coming,”* when a wise king will *“execute justice and righteousness in the land.”* Isaiah describes this king, writing, *“He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened... the ears of the deaf unstopped...the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”* We anticipate the Messiah who liberates humanity from the wilderness and fears of our lives. Advent helps us focus on what we celebrate at Christmas – the birth of a Savior, Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Long before the commercialism of Christmas, early Christians celebrated Jesus as God’s gift to the world. Early Christians celebrated Christ’s birth with only the good news of Immanuel – “God is with us.” Something which is often forgotten about Advent is that it was originally a season very much like Lent. Advent was originally a quiet season inviting a return to God, so that renewed, humanity might begin a new church year re-centered upon the gift of God’s grace. Advent can still be a time of quiet reflection on the mystery of Christ. Like the anthem we just heard, “Thou Shalt Know Him When He Comes,” Christ continues to come into our lives without “din or drums” – he comes quietly; we shall know him “by the holy harmony which his coming makes in thee.”

Yet, we have replaced the holy mystery of God’s incarnation in Christ with a jolly guy in a red suit, and the reality of Christ’s living voice with the din of pre-recorded 24/7 holiday muzak. Advent is a time to hear again God’s quiet voice speaking to us in the wilderness of life.

This year has not been the full-speed exit from the pandemic that perhaps we imagined it would be. We are finding it hard to exit our own wilderness journey of two and half years of anxiety and

fear. We are finding it difficult to experience the full restoration of human community that we long for. Instead, we find our world more divided than ever, nations are at war and the weak and vulnerable continue to be oppressed. We long for the coming of a wise king who will “*execute justice and righteousness in the land.*”

Isaiah’s voice of hope, originally spoken to Israel, “*Comfort, O comfort my people,*” now speaks to us and our generation, living in the wilderness of division, anxiety and brokenness. Isaiah encourages us to make his words our own; we are to be voices of comfort in the wilderness for others. Though we wait for Christ’s second coming, Christ is also raised and alive, dwelling in each of us through faith. Christ gives you the harmony of his peace so that you might offer comfort and hope to others in the wilderness of their lives.

The words of the prophets always place us squarely in this world, because they firmly understood that this world is the place of God’s work. Today’s reading from Mark shows us, not the babe in the manger, but the Jesus who says, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” “Repent” is not a word we usually associate with the season of Advent, but it literally means to have a change of mind about God, and about ourselves and our neighbor. We are encouraged to realize that in Christ the kingdom of God is already near to us.

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ baptism reveals God’s kingdom and the power of the Holy Spirit, equipping Jesus to transform the wilderness into a place of life and hope. In the words of Isaiah, “*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.*” With Jesus in our lives, our wilderness moments become places of redemption and hope. To people anxious and fearful for the future, Jesus allows us to see God’s grace already present in and transforming the wilderness of our lives.

Like Jesus, you have also been baptized to live in the wilderness of this world with grace and peace. Like Jesus, you have been baptized to carry a message of hope to a weary world. Jesus dwells in you with a holy harmony of grace and peace, so that you might offer hope to others.

We don’t just attend church; we are called to be the church in the wilderness for others. In Christ, the kingdom of God has come near to you – in your home, at school, at work, in this church, with Christ you can be a voice of comfort and hope in the wilderness of this world.

Believe in the good news, and live as if God’s kingdom is revealed through you.
May your life be good news for others. Amen.