

U-Turns Welcome Here

Advent 2 B

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

When you open the gospel according to Luke, you find the beloved story of Jesus' birth. There we read about Elizabeth pregnant with cousin John and Mary pregnant with Jesus. There in Luke we read about the journey of Joseph with Mary from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea to be enrolled in the census called by Roman Emperor "Caesar" Augustus. We read about the baby in the manger, the angel chorus singing "Glory to God" to the shepherds watching their flocks by night. All very familiar stuff. But when you open the gospel according to Mark, you find John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness. There is no reference in Mark to Jesus' birth. The first name to appear in Mark is the prophet Isaiah, and all of a sudden John is baptizing people, including Jesus. That, Mark says, is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Nothing there in the earliest of the four gospels about how, when or where Jesus of Nazareth was born. If Mark were it, we wouldn't have Christmas. But Mark is a good guide for our Advent journey.

Believe it or not, Mark's is the only gospel where the word "gospel" appears, and the whole thing just jumps in and starts without a verb,

what your grammar teacher would have called an incomplete sentence or no sentence at all: *The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Period. Perhaps Mark meant it as a title, a heading. In any case, there right at the the beginning of Mark's abrupt beginning, you find John the wild prophet of a baptism of repentance, John who wore camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey, John who proclaimed a message of transformation, lifted from the older prophet Isaiah: *Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill brought low. The crooked straight and the rough places plain.*

John was what we might call a "turnaround specialist." He advocated change in individual hearts and the world, and he was himself an agent of such change. His message doesn't look too appealing to us, and if we are flipping through the channels of the early life of Jesus, we are likely to flip right out of Mark and locate the Hallmark-friendly station sponsored by Luke. Google "angels" and "shepherds" and "Bethlehem manger" and you will be taken to Luke. Google "magi" and Matthew pops up. Google "Word made flesh" and you get to John's gospel.

But the lectionary gives us Mark this year, and here we are. I have just read a book of the collected sermons of an old Southern preacher named Fred Craddock. He is a master of the pulpit and a craftsman of

the well-turned phrase. In one of his sermons, Craddock explores the restraint and discipline in the New Testament letter of James: "I used to say to my students all the time that restraint or discipline or self-control is essential if you're to have a productive life. It's essential if you're going to have any kind of freedom. Freedom is a prison flower; it grows only where there is restraint and discipline. If you get up in the morning and there is nothing disciplined and laid out for you, the chances are the day will be wasted." (*The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, 2011, p. 270)

Freedom is a prison flower; it grows only where there is restraint and discipline. A lovely and powerful image! Advent is, as I said last week, a brief season for restraint and discipline, a time for the church to be in training to be able to receive again the good news of the incarnation, to be able to greet the birth of Jesus as something other than an excuse to have Christmas. In Advent we admire the prison flower of freedom. In Advent we consider the message of John the Baptist who never entered into the positive thinking of Norman Vincent Peale or Robert Schuller. Have you ever paid attention to the TV preachers? They are either all about sin and damnation and the end of the world soon, or they are all about that blessed beauty within you that just requires a magic key to unlock and set free.

Religious traditions such as ours are more likely to fall off the spectrum on the sinless positive side. We do grace better than groveling. Most of our churches avoid the “s” word (sin) and thus make no provision for repentance, confession, forgiveness and assurance. But today our texts will not let us off the hook. Isaiah preaches comfort. John in Mark preaches repentance. What’s a sin-free gathering of theological liberals like us supposed to do?

This is where a little old fashioned conservative evangelical orthodoxy comes in handy. What some call that good old time religion. The freedom we liberals so love is a prison flower. It grows only where there is restraint and discipline. Ogden Nash said progress was a good idea once, but it has been going on too long. The liberal mainline Protestant is someone who believes life is a path of progress to which Jesus is invited to enter, merging (from the left) into our lane and helping us to move forward. The evangelical, on the other hand, believes life without Jesus is a path to perdition, redeemed only by the prospect of a head-on crash, a head-on collision that is Jesus forcing us to turn around. Not just change lanes. But turn completely around. A 180. A U-turn. The evangelical hears John the Baptist saying, “Make a straight road for the coming Messiah!” and translates it this way: The journey back to God always begins with a U-turn. Ain’t no progress

possible on the road we was on before Jesus. Freedom is a prison flower.

We don't do our religion that way, most of us. We were raised to be Christian, to never know a time when we weren't a follower of Jesus. We don't go down into a deep tank or river of water, head down under, when we get baptized. We get a little sprinkling on top. Not so dramatic, not so dangerous. Any change must be gradual, if not glacial. We do not come to church expecting to be knocked off our horse, blinded by lightning and hearing the voice of Jesus, like Saul of Tarsus. We don't try to scare people into coming down front after sermons for an altar call, "coming to Jesus" in tears, with heaving shoulders and sobs of regret and remorse. We don't emphasize change so much as blessing. A little something to take the edge off, maybe, but not gut-wrenching, soul-searing, heart-burning transformation. Our way of doing religion is more like Al Franken's Saturday Night Live character, Stuart Smalley, whose therapeutic technique was to get clients to look in the mirror and say words of self-affirmation: "I'm smart enough... and doggone it, people like me." We go for those mellowing agents in ketchup as Garrison Keillor promotes it in *A Prairie Home Companion*. But these Advent texts slap us in the face and splash us with ice cold water: the coming of the Lord demands restraint and discipline. Making

a way in the desert for our God requires serious preparation. As God journeys to earth as Emanuel (God with us), our journey to God begins in earnest. It is a journey that always begins with a U-turn, a thorough self-search, a reflective evaluation of who we are and what's going on with us and where we're headed. That's why Advent used to be known as a "little Lent." The colors used to be purple for both seasons. Advent was, like Lent, a time of penitence and self-discovery, a time for housecleaning repentance and getting ready for a royal guest. Now the emphasis, along with the color blue, is more royal and less repentance.

But John the Baptist won't let us jump right into our Christmas stockings. We are not there yet. They say that when you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is to stop digging. When you find yourself on the wrong road, turn around. U-turns are welcome here. In fact, they are encouraged. *The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.* U-turns are welcome here.

Freedom is a prison flower; it grows only where there is restraint and discipline.