

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15

St. Mark 1:1-8

Mark 1

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

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

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

I think everyone admires John the Baptist. I don't know of anyone who likes him, but everyone admires him. "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."

You admire someone like this. John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived out in the desert around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet. He wore clothes that should have been thrown away. And when he preached it was fire and brimstone every time.

He said, "The kingdom is coming all right, but if you think it's going to be a bowl of cherries you'd better think again." John said, "If you don't shape up God will give you the axe like a dead tree. Hanging around religious places won't buy you any points." John famously addressed his listeners as "a brood of vipers".

"Your only hope", said John, "is to straighten up your life...as if your life depends on it...which it does."

Everyone **admires** John the Baptist. They did back then, too. Some thought he was the prophet Elijah, come back from the grave. Others thought he was the Messiah. John would have none of either. He was the "voice calling in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him'."

Everyone admires John the Baptist. **He was right.** The Baptist knew right from wrong. When he called people sinners, he was right. They were.

To be completely realistic, that's not really news.

Saying people are sinful is as true as it needs to be. People who want to be safe and right can always stick to pointing out people's sinfulness. And they often do.

If security is in short supply in a person's life...there's always a future in criticism. I think that is often the key to understanding people who are hyper-critical. People who live their lives carrying out some sort of mission to disapprove. Disapprove of people, disapprove of ideas, disapprove blindly without trying to understand and without accepting explanations. **Judgement can be an effective way to manufacture security.** When we say, "People are wrong" ...we have security. It's so true. It's going to be true every time. Even when people are at their very best, the situation of the world and a fallen humanity is such that you can say, "sinful" and you will be right on target. **There is security in condemnation.**

If we have to manufacture security.

But what happens to judgement and condemnation when security is **given** to us? A complete supply - all the security we will ever need. What if you are more than your ability to avoid sins?

The crowning point of John the Baptist's short sermon that is recorded in our Gospel reading from Mark is that his call for repentance is not the end of the story. John says, "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."

Here was John the Baptist, a world-class condemner. He was probably feeling pretty good, because he was telling people how wrong they were and this was familiar territory for John. A big crowd had come out to admire how accurate everything was that he was saying.

Everything was going along fine. But on this particular day, John didn't confine himself to *describing* how people are. He said someone was coming who could *change* the way people are – one who will bring the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Sin is an accurate description of the world we live in. Hope is the promise of God. Inspiration is the gift of the Holy Spirit. John recognized Jesus as God having come to be with his people. That recognition changed everything. The words of John the Baptist became words of reconciliation.

People can get used to it. We can get used to responding to everyone and everything with criticism, judgement, and anger. We might think that John would have been frustrated and confused. After a celebrated career in the condemning business, John's message moved forward grew beyond his ability to accurately describe sin and speculate about God's wrath. Here he was, with a crowd on hand and the fulfillment of what he had been promising – and there was no room for anger. Condemnation was irrelevant.

John the Baptist spoke of hope and inspiration – because he knew about the coming of Christ.

Security is often the key to understanding a need to condemn others. When John started speaking of the coming of Jesus, he **had** security. He did not have security from condemning people. He didn't get it from dishing out judgement. John the Baptist didn't have to manufacture security at all. John was in the presence of God.

Anger, judgement, fear, all give way to peace. God is coming and God loves you.

Good for John. We're glad he finally got a load off his mind. But what about now? We have also been talking about people we know today, people like us who may spend too much time in condemning others. We've been talking about the times when we have found ourselves striking out in judgment at others...because of fear, or misunderstanding. What is the Gospel for us?

It is the peace of being inspired by the Holy Spirit and having hope in the future.

There is not that much security in saying things, even true things, if they don't make any difference. It doesn't help all that much to compare ourselves to other people if our security is not based on other people...but on God.

As much fun as it is to condemn people. And as easy as it is to remember theological truths that have been shortened to the size of a bumper sticker. And as comforting as it is to know answers **for sure**. There is no security in any of those things.

Security comes when we see Jesus coming into our lives. Jesus who defeated death. That's significant, because a living Jesus has things to say about how your life is changing. A living Jesus will have new things to say about your life tomorrow.

Your religion does offer security. But it is not the security of definite, black and white **answers**. Jesus Christ offers the security of being with you as you face the **questions**. You can be excited about a new life everyday.

You have so much security that you can forgive and be reconciled with people. There is more comfort in that than there will ever be in condemnation.

It may be that we don't want to give up the security of condemnation. We may be afraid of the presence of God.

It will be new, unknown. But God will not leave us alone, desperately trying to manufacture security out of other people's sins.

God's love is walking into your life this morning just as real, and maybe just as unexpected, as he did to John the Baptist. Out of nowhere and into our lives where we are so busy knowing right from wrong – but we could do with some peace.

That's what Advent is about. Preparing for God to come to us as Jesus Christ. Coming into our lives and changing them. Putting a stop to fear and self-justification.

Everyone admires John the Baptist, rightly telling people they are sinful. But it is when John the Baptist is secure, and at peace, and in the presence of Christ that we have the most to learn from him. That is when he can tell us more than the fact that we are wrong. He can tell us that we are loved by God.