

2024: The Year of Mark
Advent 2B, Mark 1:1-8, Isaiah 40:1-11
Grace Church Newton
December 10, 2023

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

Comfort, comfort ye my people. Speak ye peace, thus saith our God. Amen.

Imagine you are in Galilee around the year 70CE. War has been raging around you for several years. Foreign forces, Roman imperial forces, have laid siege to Jerusalem, the temple has been destroyed, many Jews are fleeing their homeland to try to find safety. In the physical, archaeological record from this time we have evidence of the devastation as recorded by the victors: a frieze carved at the Arch of Titus in Rome depicting the triumphal procession of soldiers and dignitaries returning from the Holy Land laden with plunder from the temple including, at the center, a menorah. Or the image on Roman coins, stamped for over 25 years beginning in the year 71CE to celebrate the fall of Judea and the temple in Jerusalem. The caption on the coin reads “JUDEA CAPTA” – “Judea has been captured.” The image on the reverse shows a woman seated on the ground beneath a palm tree that stands tall, representing Rome. The woman is in a position of mourning and, in many versions of the coin, a man stands on the other side of the tree with his hands bound, captive. Imagine that these coins, these images circulate in the daily life of your village, of villages throughout Judea, reminding you of the violence, the loss.

In your town or village, people are divided. Some proclaim that God will raise up a Messiah – a new anointed one, in the line of David, to defeat the Romans on the field of battle. Others argue for a conciliatory stance toward the Roman authorities, hoping to avoid further bloodshed and repression.

Then there is a third group. This group refuses to follow either of the first two. Instead, they are followers of a Galilean rabbi who died about forty years earlier. This group is caught in between. The Roman authorities suspect them of continuing the insurrection that brought about the crucifixion of their leader, Jesus. To some rabbis of the time they are heretics. To the zealots who continue to fight, they are seen as ineffective against Roman oppression.

Here you are, in a world in turmoil and turbulence and grief. What are you to believe? What choice will you make?

Though it's hard for us to know exactly – and respected scholars do hold different opinions – perhaps it was from a setting like this that the gospel of Mark emerged.¹ And with today's Gospel selection, we get to explore the very first verses of Mark's gospel.

It starts by proclaiming the author's opinion: "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God." Verse 1.

As it continues, the author of Mark doesn't offer us the images of the Son of God that might be most in our minds this time of year – God born in human form, as a baby with all its vulnerability and promise. With Mark, there are no angels visiting Mary, inviting her to become the mother of Jesus. There are no donkeys, no trip to Bethlehem, no baby, no manger, no shepherds, no wise men. In this first Gospel, in this early effort to try to make sense of who Jesus was and what his life meant, the author of Mark begins in a very different place, with very different imagery.

In effect, the author says, "In order to make sense of who Jesus was, we need to seek meaning from our tradition. From Judaism." For Mark, that means the prophets.

And so we arrive at verses 2 and 3:

"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.'"

So this is where Mark looks as he seeks wisdom from his tradition to make sense of his current day. Scholars believe that these verses from the book of Isaiah – repeated here in Mark – were composed right at the end of Babylonian exile, the forced exit of Jerusalem's population following the destruction of the original temple, about 600 years before Mark's time. Mark reached back into the tradition and found a people similarly devastated with their loss. Forced to flee. Facing an uncertain future. Not knowing where God was for

¹ There is no scholarly consensus as to location of the community from which the Gospel of Mark emerges. Consistent with the imagery offered here, evidence exists to locate it in Palestine. Other possibilities include Rome or in a Roman province outside of Palestine [\[Source 1722-23\]](#).

them. Isaiah cried out that God would return to Jerusalem. That the Jewish people would return to Jerusalem. And that they would be comforted.

That gives us part of the picture of how Mark begins to make sense of Jesus. In order to get the full picture, though, we need to look a little closer. You see, these words in verse 2 were recorded differently in other manuscripts. Instead of being introduced as “written in the prophet Isaiah,” they are introduced as “written in the *prophets*” [[Source](#) 47-48]. Because, in fact, the first part of the quote isn’t from Isaiah. It’s from the prophet Malachi: “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” [Mal 3:1]. Hmm.

You may be wondering, “Why? Why dig into this level of detail? How does this matter?” It matters to Mark, and I think, to us, for the same reason that John the Baptist is the first character to appear – abruptly – on the scene in the gospel of Mark. Isaiah, the prophet referenced here, called Israel to trust in the *comfort* of God. Malachi, like John the Baptist, calls the people to repent, to examine their ways, to confess their sins and shortcomings.

So in these first four verses of the gospel of Mark, we are told that we are about to hear the beginning of the good news of Jesus. Then Malachi, along with the vivid imagery of John the Baptist, reminds us that we are called upon to examine our own ways – like the original audiences of this gospel – to make a choice about what is right and just – about what it means to walk in the way of God. And, finally, through the lens of Isaiah, we are reminded that always – even in times of great devastation – God will be our comforter.

I am feeling a kinship with the Mark these days. We are at the beginning of our new liturgical year this Second Sunday of Advent. In this coming year, Mark will be the prominent gospel used each week in our lectionary. I am glad for that. As I think about where we are, in our world, in our time, I see some parallels with the community that might have been among the early audiences for this gospel. In our new year, we will go through national elections rife with uncertainty, unpredictability. At risk are substantial shifts in our systems of government, nationally and globally; in jeopardy is the outcome of the war in Ukraine, and the war in Israel and Gaza, and the fate of refugees around the world; at stake is our ability to address environmental degradation in a comprehensive way.

In *our* church next year we will elect a new Presiding Bishop and a new Diocesan Bishop. And given continuing shifts in religious practices in this country, there is a growing need for all of us to be aware of what’s happening in the parishes and congregations around us as we make our way together into a future that will be different from the past. Even here at Grace, we have new staff and clergy, which also brings adjustments.

Change, potentially dramatic change, will be our context this next year.

So, I feel well-accompanied by the gospel of Mark in this time. Mark reached back into the tradition and found a people in turbulent times, facing uncertainty, trying to understand where God was for them. He drew on that wisdom. We can do the same. This year, we will *need* to do the same.

How will we walk accompanied by Mark this year? I suggest *humbly* and with a *repentant heart*. Examining how *we* may have contributed to our society being where it is, not falling into the easy stance of pointing the finger at “the other side,” but recognizing that we, too, are part of this system that is so creaky and broken right now.

How will we walk accompanied by Mark this year? Listening for God’s guidance, trusting Isaiah’s promise of presence and comfort for God’s people.

In this Advent season, as always, we live in the in-between. God *has* come in human form...and yet we wait...we wait for God’s reign of justice and peace for all. And this year...this one promises to be a turbulent, in-between year. In this year of Mark, may we all choose to listen for “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” May we walk humbly. May we trust in the comfort of the God of Israel.

Comfort, comfort ye my people. Speak ye peace, thus saith our God.

Amen.