

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 10, 2023

Beloved, on this second Sunday of Advent as we celebrate the peace that Christ brings into our lives and into the world, we continue in our Advent worship series that we've entitled The Weary World Rejoices. We at once acknowledge the heaviness of the world right now, the particular areas in which we sense and feel that, and we also, in the midst of that, claim the ways in which God brings joy and life and hope and possibility in our midst this Advent season. So we will this day center ourselves on the Gospel of Mark. If you want to turn to your Bible there in the pew, you can turn it to the Gospel of Mark. We're in the first chapter. We're going to read verses 1-5. This is for Mark, although it's pretty brief, this is pretty much a prologue to the story of Jesus, okay? Some of the other gospels have longer prologues, but I want to posit to you this morning that there is power in the prologue and we will read. Before we read from Holy Scripture, let us go to God In prayer.

Gracious Spirit, as you moved across the waters of creation, we pray that you might move amongst us this morning. Surprise us with your presence and with your peace. Quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Mark, chapter 1, beginning with the first verse.

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.'" So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Courtney Buggs, Professor of Homiletics at Louisville Theological Seminary, tells the story that "In 1952–1952–Private Sarah Evans was on her way home from her first military assignment when she refused to move to the back of the bus. Upon refusing she was taken to jail and detained for 13 hours. Evans sued the Interstate Commerce Commission for discrimination. Despite a judicial victory in November of 1955, some three years later, the ruling was not enforced until 1961. Meanwhile in March of 1955 a young black teenage woman, Claudette Colvin, refused to give up her seat to a white person on a bus. Having been exposed to the actions of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Colvin was emboldened to resist the injustice she experienced on the city bus. As a result she too was handcuffed and arrested, and like Evans her story was hidden until recent years. Before there was Rosa Parks, the Civil Rights icon attributed with prompting the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, there were Sarah Evans and Claudette Colvin, trailblazing young Black women, who set in motion that which would later be

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 10, 2023

attributed to Parks. Their names are scarcely if at all associated with the Civil Rights Movement, yet their actions precipitated one of the most pivotal events of our time. Evans preceded Colvin, who preceded Parks. Just as John preceded Jesus. There is power in the prologue of the story.” Buggs continues, “Forerunners are often unseen figures and unsung heroes. Their backstories are often unknown. The details of their lives are under imagined or undervalued. They garner minimal attention because they are forerunners, those who plow the ground, destabilize the terrain, and make ready for change that is coming. They are not *the one*. They are those who come before *the one*”. Every movement needs those who function as an advanced team, that is, those who prepare the way for something beyond the present state of affairs.”

In today's reading we find John preparing the way for Jesus. This John, the scripture tells us, shows up in the wilderness, for some a place of danger and fear, for others a place of possibility. Now each of the gospels begins in a different way. We learned that last Advent as we told the story together. Mark's prologue— it's one of the most purposeful. When I use the word purposeful, I mean quick or short. The prologue of the Gospel of Mark doesn't include several things that the other gospels do include. Mark's gospel doesn't include any qualifiers for this man that we will know as Jesus. There is no genealogy of Jesus, no connection to a forerunner in the faith, no need to connect him to David, no need to connect him to Adam, no need Abraham. There is no need to prove, for Mark at least, this one that is to come, There's just a wild man in the wilderness. Somewhere not far off from where he's yelling at all the people, there's a plate of locusts and honey, the text will later tell us. There's this crazy man wrapped in camel hair in the wilderness raising his voice there, and there is something in what he says that is compelling to the people of God. Scripture says that all the people in Jerusalem and from across the Judean countryside, they all start coming to him at the River Jordan, confessing their sins so that they might be baptized. Whatever it is that John proclaims to the people, it draws forth from them humility, before God and one another. It draws forth from them their deep knowing that they need God, and so they come to the river bank, and they are baptized there in the Jordan. They confess their sins. Perhaps they did it quietly to John as he was about to dunk them in the water, or perhaps they shared it more openly with their neighbors. Maybe they had a corporate prayer of confession at that place, or maybe they did it silently; but either way, scripture says, before God and all the people to see, they humble themselves just like John did. Here's the interesting part of the text. This prologue, brief as it is, is purposeful. It's purposeful both personally and communally. The prologue gives us, gives the reader, the space that we need, brief as it is. It is not by mistake that this text is situated for us on this second Sunday of Advent. No, it is situated here so that we might situate ourselves within the story of Christ, that we might be allowed to realize that we too are living in the prologue of what God is yet to do, that word from last week again. The prologue has purpose for the church, for the community. If we can, we can rest and understand it. It gives us space as the people of God to reflect on how we are acting as antecedents to change, or whether we are...are we clearing a way in the wilderness for Jesus the Christ? Are we tilling the ground so that the gardener might find it ready to spread seed? Are we preparing a way for the Lord in the world? I heard a pastor recently claim that we don't build the kingdom of God. My ears perked up. I've always been taught that I'm a co-laborer in that building. He said we don't build the kingdom of God. Scripture tells us that we announce it, we

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 10, 2023

seek it, we receive it, we bear witness to it; or as NT Wright, the theologian, puts it, “We build for it. Jesus builds the kingdom. We build for it.”

Advent is fundamentally about Jesus, and in this prologue to the Christmas celebration, that miracle, it's a season that would remind us of our role and our relationship to Christ's kingdom in the world. Here In this prologue we see one who models what it means to build for the kingdom of God. In this text, if we pay attention, we can hear and see the value of those who pave the way—the way to Jesus, the way to liberation in the present day. There is purpose and there is power in this prologue, if we see it that way communally, but also personally for each of us. This prologue of Mark, it gives us a little bit of space personally to reflect on our own lives during this Advent season. What if you are living your prologue right now? What if this moment that you find yourself in is the moment just before the change which is to come?

Preacher, I'm 70 years old. If this is the prologue, this is a long prologue.
We've been married for a decade. This ain't prologue.
My kids are grown now. This isn't a prologue.

There's plenty of reasons to not think of kind of where you find yourself right now as a prologue; but for other people, and perhaps for you this morning, the Gospel of Mark situates us here on the second Sunday of Advent so that we might know that we indeed are living in the prologue of the thing which is to come. Wherever you find yourself this morning, whether it be at work or amongst your family or friends, whether it has to do with your marriage or your parenting or your classmates, you are in the prologue of the new thing that God is about to do in your life. If we are willing just for a moment to suspend any push back in our minds, if we are willing to see this moment in such a way, then we might confess, like the people from the Judean countryside, like the people who came out from Jerusalem. We might confess that we too in this particular moment need Jesus to come anew in our lives, not the worn out Christ, not the one that's lobbied back and forth politically or socially, not that one, not the one that's used as a sword to divide people, to separate us from our neighbors, not that Jesus. That Jesus is worn out and tired. We need Christ to come anew into our lives. And if we might come and confess that before God, then we might be willing to ask more faithful questions like—

How am I preparing the way for the Lord in my life?

How am I helping to make the crooked places straight?

How am I tilling the ground, unsettling the status quo, making ready for change that is to come?

How am I confessing before God and all the people to see that, indeed, I need Christ too?

In the gospel of Mark there's just a guy, one standing in the wilderness of the world or your life, who is saying that there is one that is to come. “I'm not him. I baptize you with water. He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit but that shouldn't stop you from coming now to the waters here to be renewed once again.” We just baptized two sweet babies, one is still celebrating this morning, I love it, yeah. We poured water into that font, and we made promises; and what we claim is that in those waters there is a newness that can come, a new life that can be born. There

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 10, 2023

is possibility and hope, not born of our own engineering but born of the spirit of God. If we might situate ourselves in the possibility of this season as the prologue for our lives, both personally and communally, then we might trust, then we might hope, then we might believe that there is power and there is purpose in the prologue.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.