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**Isaiah 40:1-11**

40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

40:2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

40:3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

40:4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

40:5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

40:6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

40:7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

40:8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

40:9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

40:10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

40:11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

**Mark 1:1-8**

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

1:2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

1:3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

1:5 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.

1:6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

1:7 He 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.

1:8 I have baptized you with but water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

## Proclamation of the Word

If I were to read you this familiar child's story beginning....

"And there were three little bears sitting on chairs, and two little kittens and a pair of mittens, and a little toy house and a young mouse..."

You might respond. "That's not the beginning. It doesn't make any sense to tell the story this way! You have to start with 'In the great green room, there was a telephone, and a red balloon, and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon.' Start over at the real beginning."

When we know the story, we can be unrelenting. Children can be especially unforgiving with a beloved story. They will correct you if you tell it wrong.

Mark writes chap. 1 verse 1, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Then he takes us back to the old prophet Isaiah quoting Isaiah 40:

"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,'"

Many of us are like those children.

"Tell us the real story of Jesus' beginning. Mark, tell us about the angels and shepherds, stars and mangers, a tired donkey and an innkeeper who made room in his stable. You know, Mark, the real Christmas story. What is all this talk of prophets, wilderness, and a messenger, John the baptizer? We just had a white Christmas kind of weekend. We don't want to be in the dry, dusty wilderness with a wild man yelling at us to "Repent! and be baptized." What does John the Baptist telling us about our sin, have to do with sweet baby Jesus?"

But Mark knows that we must begin here....in a wilderness. In the Netflix show *Stranger Things* there is an everyday reality, but a Goonies style group of middle school kids find themselves in a strange, dark, and scary place they call the Upside Down, a dark underside. In many ways the world seems upside down...like the darkness has taken a hold, and is squeezing out the light of God's gracious will some days.

Maybe some of us know full well we are in that wilderness just now. Some others of us are blissfully ignoring the wilderness. Or we dress up the wilderness with some tinsel and twinkling lights and avoid dealing with our sin. But the wilderness is where Mark starts telling the good news. Scott Hoezee writes,

*So, we must begin with John. We must begin with getting baptized because if you're not willing to meet the Savior with repentance in hand, then you may not find any motivation to meet and greet*

*the Savior at all. Mark knows that Jesus came for but one reason: to liberate the cosmos from its bondage to sin and decay. If you have no interest in seeing your own complicity in all that, then you'll have no more use for Jesus showing up in your life than you would for a plumber who showed up on your porch on a day when—to the best of your knowledge—you did not have a plumbing problem. In such a situation there's really nothing to do other than to tell the plumber to kindly move along.<sup>i</sup>*

In the world that Jesus was born to save, the world seemed to be turned upside down. The government was strong arming the common folks and seeking to maintain the Peace, Pax Romana. But the people were discouraged and went seeking a new way. When the people began heading out to the woods to seek God, they did not circle up and sing “Kum bah ya” at the river Jordan, they heard John yelling "Repent!!!"

Repent- It means to turn around, to change direction. John told all of the people who decided to follow his voice out from the places of security into the place of discomfort and strangeness, you know what? It is time for a new day. It is time to learn a new way or to reclaim God's way of being human together. It is time to get ready because the Lord was coming and things are about to change forever. John's message to us is confess, receive forgiveness, repent, turn, change your direction, change your purpose, be baptized into newness. Get ready. Prepare for the reign of God, the Kingdom, that is on the way. The Kingdom that will be set loose in this world through Emmanuel, God with us.<sup>ii</sup>

Perhaps that is why the writer Mark gets straight to the point. His announcement is jarring. Maybe is it not a news flash that God exists- most people believe in some kind of God or gods. But the fact that God is right here, right now, and on our side actively seeking to help us in the way we need help the most- THIS is good news! Emmanuel-God-with-us is here. And it takes a wild man named John to grab our attention- to rattle us out of our complacency. Some of us see the world is out of God's order, such a mess, that we are ready to finally admit that we need God's help, that we must change our ways. We find ourselves longing for something more. We are lost without a north star to guide us on the journey, so we are ready to look up at the sky, and start making our way in the wilderness. We find ourselves knee deep in a river- compelled to admit we need God. We are washed with water like the Jordan River, and feel both refreshed and exhilarated as if we are alive like we never have been before.

So that might be why Mark is in, such a hurry to tell us of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus- the event that reveals the TRUTH of God to us, so we can shake off our illusions of self-sufficiency, lay down our swords, pick up a hoe, and crank the tractor up. Sealed and claimed by Christ in Baptism we start feeding the hungry, bringing good news to the poor, healing the sick, and proclaiming release captives in Jesus' name. Mark doesn't waste a second so we will not waste our precious lives without knowing that God is passionate to save us!! Us- all of us- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...." (John 3:16).

I was talking with a new member who had recently moved from a more urban area to Clemson. She commented that she is struck by how dark it gets here. When you live in the city, you rarely see stars because there is so much light, but if you drive a few miles out of town here, you can be in complete darkness. And that is when it happens... you are struck by the hundreds of thousands of stars and the light of a super moon is extraordinary.

God knows we find ourselves in the wilderness, but it also the place where we see most clearly the light piercing the darkness. And we, the church of Jesus the Messiah-Christ, would not be here if it were not for John- the lone voice calling out in a wilderness.

So if we go back to the real beginning, to Creation, the Genesis we hear a single voice calling out in the void to create a new world. Like that lyric image from C.S. Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia" book *The Magician's Nephew* when the children witness the Lion King Aslan creating Narnia through his lone voice. He sings in the pre-creation darkness. Lewis writes,

*In the darkness, something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it . . . Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices; more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale; cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one as on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out . . . If you had seen and heard it, as Digory did, you would have felt quite certain that it was the First Voice, the deep one, which had made them appear and made them sing.* <sup>iii</sup>

And Mark tells us Jesus is the beginning again- the reset button. Perhaps you, perhaps we all need to hit reset- to begin again. We need a turning, a repentance. In baptism we turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in this world, and we turn to Jesus Christ, accepting him as Lord and Savior. We commit to follow Him and his teachings, showing his love. For those who have been baptized, we can return again and again, confessing regularly, hearing God's word, so God can remake us and use us for the purposes of Christ's kingdom. This is our time to jump into the sacred Story of God's saving love.

In Jesus who is mighty to save, the world was about to turn. And the God who created the world is re-creating the world, inviting us to join in the song. The cries in the wilderness, turn into a new song, and we catch a glimpse of the Kingdom as it should be.

**Perhaps Mark has the right idea to begin the Good News in the wilderness.** The wilderness is where we find ourselves most aware of our need for God. May not have be what we wanted to hear or expect, but it is what God needs to say though John. Before we go to worship at the manger in Bethlehem, we must start in the wilderness to know why God came down at Christmas.

In a moment we will sing "In the Bleak Midwinter" another kind of wilderness, Jesus comes and is born into such darkness. Jesus was born, lived, died and was raised to save us. But that was only the beginning...God still speaks, moves and redeems...and is redeeming this world that God loves. We are Baptized with the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. God is not finished with us yet. Mark doesn't write this is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God... He proclaims, it is just the *beginning* of the good news...God makes a way in the wilderness. God is with us now. Jesus comes to save us.

Let's follow the Christ child into the world and seek first the kingdom of God because God is not finished with us yet!

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<sup>i</sup> Hoezee, Scott, "Advent 2B, Preaching the Gospel," adapted, from Calvin Seminary's Sermon Starters at [www.cep.calvinseminary.edu](http://www.cep.calvinseminary.edu).

<sup>ii</sup> Kershner, Shannon, "Seeing the Light," December 7, 2104 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, adapted.

<sup>iii</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, Collier Books, New York, pp. 98-99.