

Sermon: The Shortest Distance

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

6 December 2020

Based on **Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8**

Notice that we have shifted away from the apocalyptic end times. With Isaiah, we are now closer to the beginning of the Exile where last week we were at the end, talking about the restoration of Jerusalem. And with Mark, we are suddenly at the beginning.

A person could make a good career interpreting just the first verse in Mark's Gospel, and many have. Mark wrote, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'

That's not really a complete sentence, even in the Greek vernacular Mark used. It's more a title for the book than anything else. 'The beginning' suggests Genesis and 'the good news' is literally the Gospel. As Mark's is the earliest story of Jesus, we can say that he invented a new literary form.

The thing about it is, in its brevity and directness, Mark ensures that his readers have no doubt about who Jesus is or where he came from. And then he starts talking about John the baptizer as the messenger who will prepare the way for Jesus.

Matthew begins his story with a genealogy as a way to identify Jesus as the Messiah; Luke begins with an elaborate description of births foretold and doesn't get to the genealogy until the end of chapter three – and he tells it in reverse order from Matthew; John goes back to the very beginning of everything in his Gospel, in a kind of expanded version of Mark's allusion to Genesis.

Mark could have started at any point in the Jesus narrative, but he chose John the baptizer preparing the way of the Lord as the beginning of the good news.

He then combined a verse from Isaiah with one from Malachi, as in, 'A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3) See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me' (Malachi 3:1).

Mark fudges Scripture references to make a point that what happens next fulfills an ancient prophecy. And then John appeared.

It's important that John appear in the wilderness, away from the centers of power and influence; if he came today, think of him showing up in an Iowa corn field rather than on the White House lawn, or on the steps of the Capitol Building, or even here on Fountain Square. And the people from the countryside and all of Jerusalem came to *him*.

John appeared, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism itself was nothing new in Judea. Baptism with water was used to purify oneself before a religious ritual, for example, or if you were converting from paganism to Judaism, and it was sometimes used as an act of repentance. But with John, when he baptized you, you confessed your sins.

Amy-Jill Levine writes that, 'the Gospels generally present sinners as wealthy people who have not attended to the poor.'¹ In a first-century context, sinners were also those who had removed themselves from the common welfare, who took care of themselves rather than the community. It's part of the human condition. Think of Charles Dickens' *Scrooge* character and what happened to him on Christmas Eve that time.

We tend to think of sinners as people other than ourselves. Sinners are bad people who have probably done bad things, people to avoid; if we see one coming toward us on the street, we cross to the other side. It can get very lonely on our side of the street.

If we use the first-century definition and think of sinners as those who take care of themselves first, we get a different picture. In that sense, a sinner could be an old friend whose company we enjoy but who nonetheless has no time or inclination to help anyone who might have fallen on hard times.

Lately, we've been hearing about people who are now jobless because of the pandemic. Some of these people – a lot of them, actually – are in danger of losing their homes. Wouldn't it be great if their landlords or mortgage holders could find a way to involve themselves in easing the plight of their tenants?

A friend of ours, the Rev. Dr. Stan Duncan, wrote a book about globalization² some time ago. In it, he related the story of a man who once looked at his mortgage bill and wondered where his monthly payment really went.

He doubted that there was someone at the bank who looked forward to getting his check every month because he sent his payment to a post office box in some far away city, and the more he thought about it, the more he wondered what would happen if he stopped paying his mortgage. He figured, only one way to find out.

Duncan wrote, ‘In October 2009 a federal bankruptcy court in the Southern District of New York ruled that PHH Mortgage Company had no legal right to foreclose on a delinquent borrower’s home because it couldn’t prove it owned the note...Judge Robert Drain wiped out the mortgage debt because no one could trace the securities chain and prove ownership.’

Now, while we do not recommend anyone actually stop paying their rent or mortgage just because it disappears inside some faceless corporation, this story underscores the very real problem we have today where thousands of people *can’t* pay their rent or their mortgage. Are they sinners? Are they righteous? What happens next?

Back in Isaiah’s day, there was a real-world precedent to send out road crews in advance of an emperor or king who decided to tour the realm. They would fill in the potholes and shave down the bumps and sometimes even straighten the road, all in the name of making for a comfortable journey. Isaiah borrowed this imagery to make it clear that we should do the same for God, the ultimate king, and he turned it into poetry.

As we said earlier, Mark used Isaiah to fulfill a prophecy. A sharp-eared listener in his congregation might have noticed how much John the baptizer resembled the prophet Elijah. Second Kings describes Elijah as ‘A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist’ (1:8). John wasn’t hairy but he did wear a camel’s hair shirt and, except for the sketchy diet, it was Mark’s intention to draw a comparison between John and Elijah, who was last seen at the end of the Book of Malachi.

Now, if John was meant to be a stand-in for Elijah, and if Jesus was the one more powerful than John, clearly, Jesus must be the Messiah. These first eight verses in Mark set us up for everything else we’re going to hear.

And what does any of this have to do with us and how we live our lives today? Well, first, it’s not about us, not all of it. It’s about God and what God intends for the world – the world of people and civilization, not simply of Creation.

John and Jesus want salvation for us so that we might participate in God's work, that we might know peace and justice, love and mercy, and forgiveness and grace.

Advent readings tend to emphasize repentance, and that makes sense because we are in a season of anticipation, whether we are looking forward to the Second Coming or back to the First Coming. We have to get ready and returning to God helps with that.

The point of repentance is not to bring shame to anyone; the point is to help us acknowledge the obstacles that prevent us from welcoming God into our lives. Isaiah preaches words of comfort about God gathering in the lambs in his arms right after telling the nation that her penalty has been paid.

Repentance is for everyone. God's grace is for everyone.

Just as we are all welcome to the Lord's Table, we are all welcome to receive what God wants to give us: freedom and a full life here and now. And the shortest distance to that is on a straight and level highway to letting God into your heart.

Amen.

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¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014), 35-36.

² Rev. Dr. Stan G. Duncan, *The Greatest Story Oversold: Understanding Economic Globalization* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).