**Tidings** (Advent 2 – Mark 1. 1-8)

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How do you prepare for the radical intersection of divine with human life? How do you get ready for God breaking directly into our world, our experience, coming to be with us in person? That’s what the season of Advent is about and today’s reading from Mark’s gospel is packed full of signs that something momentous is about to happen – a whole series of references and images that are supposed to help us wake up, to pay attention and discern God’s meaning.

You remember the first words of the story of creation in the book of Genesis? ‘In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth …’. At the start of John’s gospel, an allusion to this Genesis passage as pertaining to the advent of Christ is powerfully emphasised: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being’ (John 1. 1-3). In our passage from Mark, the allusion to the creation of the world is subtler, briefer, but still unmistakable. ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’ (Mark 1.1). We’re supposed to understand we’re on the brink of something that has cosmic significance.

The events proclaimed by the gospel are then immediately connected to God’s promise to the people of Israel. The Hebrew prophet Malachi had said, ‘See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple’ (Mal. 3. 1). And Isaiah had prophesied: ‘A voice cries out: “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’ (Isa. 40. 3). The wilderness, of course, references Israel’s Exodus journey, ‘the time when God was preparing the people for entry into the promised land’. Scholar Bonnie Thurston suggests: ‘Probably for this reason, [this passage] is appointed as the text for the second Sunday in Advent. In scripture, the wilderness is the place where people go to meet God or where God chooses to appear’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In just four verses, then, the writer of Mark’s gospel has connected us to the story of creation and the story of Israel. This is the framework he offers for recognising the import of the story of Jesus.

There’s another feature of it all that strikes me too. And that’s the emphasis on the notion of ‘news’, ‘good news’ or what used to be translated as ‘glad tidings’. The story kicks off with the assertion that what’s unfolding is good news – ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’, and this whole introductory section concludes with a summary of Jesus’ own words: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ (Mark 1. 15). The passage from Isaiah from which Mark draws has a similar emphasis: the prophet is told to ‘Cry out’, to ‘Get you up to a high mountain, O herald of good tidings to Zion; lift up your voice with strength, O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’ (Isa. 40. 9). And recall similarly that in Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth, an angel brings to some astonished shepherds the good news of God’s coming, which is ‘glad tidings of great joy to you and all people’.

At one level, this might seem a banal and obvious point. Of course God’s coming among us is news; and, of course, given the goodness of God, we’re expected to be happy about it, to want to tell each other about it. This is what the word ‘evangelism’ means – from the ‘eu’, meaning good, and ‘angelion’ meaning news or message. But, though it might seem obvious, I think there are some implications of it that are worth dwelling on.

For one thing, this insistence on the newsworthiness of events reminds us that God’s coming, God’s presence with us is a public matter, publically proclaimed. It’s to be told, spoken about, shared – in principle – with anyone. This feels like a no-brainer to us and our egalitarian age, but not all understandings of the divine encourage such an open door policy. Ancient mystery religions were essentially secret societies, whose knowledge and rituals were available only to the initiated, and the early church had to struggle against its own tendencies in this direction in various forms of ‘gnosticism’. If you’re powerful or trying to accumulate power, it’s always tempting to hijack God, to make God available only to an elect few (of whom, of course, you happen to be one). But just as Jesus’ practice of hospitality subverted attempts by the religious authorities to confine access to God only to those *they* deemed pure and fit, so Scripture’s insistence on the *public* proclamation of God’s word works against ‘God’ becoming another possession of a powerful elite.

This doesn’t mean that there’s no such thing as maturing in faith, growing more fully in wisdom, discernment, authority and love. But in our tradition such growth is never about initiation into secret knowledge or practice, but the fruit of deeper and more generous participation in a truth to which all are given access and all are invited. The good news of God is proclaimed from the mountain tops, within earshot of the whole city of Jerusalem.

A further implication, then, is that this good news concerns the whole of our life in the world. In the Scriptures, it’s made known from the heavens – in the movements of the stars and the voices of angels, *and* through the whole earth – in the wilderness, by rivers and lakes and flocks of sheep, on mountains and up sycamore trees and in crowded places. God is present to us, God meets us in all the places we are, and invites us to be in *those* places differently, more freely, more attentively. This news is not esoteric, insider knowledge that takes us out of the world, but empowerment to live our daily lives in the light of a reality whose advent among us evokes gladness and rejoicing.

And this brings us, finally, to the question of what this good news is news of. What content can we give this notion of God’s coming, God’s nearer presence, recognised in the life of Jesus?

Traditionally on the second Sunday in Advent we light the peace candle. A biblical scholar I knew used to complain that, in English, ‘peace’ can be a *flaccid* word – a pale notion which points more to an absence than a presence, the mere absence of war or conflict. Whereas, he insisted, the biblical concept of peace – shalom – is a rich and positive notion, with connotations of well-being, abundance, and justice. Isaiah speaks of the coming of God in just these terms: ‘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 those that are with young’ (Isa. 40.11). So also the angels who gave glad tidings of Jesus’ birth to Luke’s shepherds: ‘Glory be to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours’.

The good news is news of peace, shalom, the in-breaking of God’s blessing and healing and abundant life. It’s news we receive insofar as we learn to participate in who and how God is. This involves, as John the Baptist proclaims, repenting – turning away from what is not God, letting ourselves be led through the wilderness of our fears and lostness, so as to deepen our trust in the one who calls us on. It involves being baptized with the Holy Spirit – which is to say being open to receive the grace that only God can give, letting God in, having our patterns of thought and habits of heart transformed, our possibilities for action renewed.

The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is the strange and wondering testimony that in and through his advent among us we are being given access in a new and deeper way to the reality that leads from lack to fullness, from fear to love, from alienation to peace – shalom. That’s evangelism I can get excited about, glad tidings indeed!

1. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), *Preaching Mark*, pp. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)