

Advent 2 Dec. 6, 2020

Mark's gospel retells Isaiah 40 as 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus. Mark puts a name to Isaiah's 'voice crying out...' John emerges (in Mark's gospel) a fully formed character. He has a role and a wardrobe and habits that set him apart as noteworthy. John carries the stereotype of the outcast man of God – the one whom society doesn't know how to handle.

John is self-sufficient, self-assured, and certainly convinced that God is up to something, just as Isaiah was convinced. But the stereotype needs tweaking.

I'm guilty of imagining John as a wild-eyed lunatic who happened to get it right where Jesus is concerned. But commentary (and the pairing of Isaiah and Mark have begun to convince me otherwise. John is described as a powerfully persuasive speaker... so why do we imagine a wild man? Isaiah imagines a voice crying comfort – speaking tenderly – inviting obstacles to be removed. Sure, removing barriers is hard work; earthmoving (as described in Isaiah 40) requires hard tools - grader blades and dynamite in this day and age – but does the hard work require ranting and raving, or a consistent, persistent utterance from someone who has confidence in God?

Here is another thing: as much as I love Advent, the suggested readings for this year's Scriptural cycle leave a little to be desired. I've been known to complain about the intrusion of John the Baptist on our December preparations. He seemed out of place to me, once upon a time. But in a year dominated by unusual things - in a cycle of news that has us grieving loss after loss - in a world that would have no trouble imagining it was being divinely punished (for the record - we're not!) John's re-telling of Isaiah is just the thing.

Preachers turn to Scripture to know what to say. That's the first rule of homiletics. But the second rule - one that often goes unnoticed - is that the text can also tell the preacher HOW to say what needs to be said. And suddenly I'm wondering why John the Baptist wouldn't understand that principle.

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Much of the latter chapters of Isaiah are about conveying hope to a broken people. And when people are suffering, they don't get better quicker if you shout at them. Healing requires hope and hope is best delivered tenderly. What would it be like if John the Baptist - confident, independent, and full of good news - offered his message with the tenderness of Mr Rogers?

Before the Christmas decorations went up at our house - before the Christmas movies started, Lea and I watched Tom Hanks 'become' Mr Rogers in the 2019 movie "A beautiful day in the neighbourhood." In it, we were reminded of the simple beauty of Mr. Rogers approach to everything - the gentle urgency of his attention to whatever (or whoever) was right in front of him. Mr Rogers had faith in Children - in their need to know; their right to know. Fred Rogers entered the world of television - a world where the loudest voice gets the most attention - and spoke tenderly to his audience for more than 30 years.

The effect of that habit of tenderness is immeasurable.

It is a habit that is too often absent these days. In my previous fervour for the purity of liturgical Christmas, I too often forgot the tenderness that is inherent in the message, not just of the Christmas story, but in all of God's efforts to be present; to embody hope, love joy and peace in the world.

While I do believe that the practice of hopeful waiting that we call Advent is important, I also am convinced that the waiting is made bearable by the gentle reminder of Isaiah – echoed by John – of who it is that waits for us.

John assures us that he is not the one, but the one who is to come bears Holy authority – and the powerful persistence of that same spirit that called order out of Creation's early chaos.

The gentleness of Isaiah's message – the humble persistence of John - each speaks to the gentle reality of Jesus. The one we wait for carries with him God's desire for our welfare. Jesus (even in Advent) represents the gentle insistence of God that we still have a home in God's love