

Wild Waiting – Niquita Hohm

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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. ... 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!" There is a big time reversal happening here, a movement out of desolation and into God's glory and restoration. The cities that were the first to witness the destruction now get a front row seat to God's victory.

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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all the people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. I'm sensing that the making everything level is less about the preparation of the way itself. We know God can make ways out of ways where there seem to be no way. I think the valleys being lifted up and the mountains being leveled is more about everyone seeing it together. It's exactly what Michelle Higgins recently taught us in her discussion on protest as Christian witness. If we're going to pray for God's kingdom to come, we better know what we're asking for. She reinforced for us that many people talk as though they want the kingdom to come already, but do we really want God's kingdom to come, God's will to be done?—to knock us flat on our backs off of our carefully constructed and meticulously maintained platforms? For the way of the Lord to be prepared, I need to be shoveling some earth off of my mountain and packing it down into the valleys.

Similarly, the word about us being withering grass and fading flowers may sound discouraging to those feeling pretty comfortable with how their lives have stacked up so far. But it might also come as a word of comfort to the oppressed that those in positions on top won't remain there forever.

As if this upside-down nature of God's way and coming kingdom wasn't enough, the king who will bring it all about is one of those gentle nurturing types, who lovingly carries little dependent creatures in his bosom.

This Advent season calls us to hope. But what kind of a hope? A hope that works hard in the wilderness, shoveling, scooping, earth-bending (I hope my fellow Avatar fans caught that imagery), through the hard but hopeful work of lament and repentance that Pastor Ben taught us last week, preparing the way.

In this introduction to the Gospel of Mark we have both continuity with what's gone before as well as radically new elements at play. There is the familiarity of the Jewish ritual of washing in living water as an appeal to God's forgiveness. However, try to imagine, jumping backwards over the 2000 years of context we have for baptism, what would it have been like to experience baptism just as it was being initiated in Jesus' baptism? Something wildly new and exciting is going on here. People are already flocking to John standing in all his strangeness in the wilderness waters, and then, there's something, rather someone, more to come too?

There's the familiar theme from our passage in Isaiah of preparing the way for the Lord. This is asked repeatedly of each generation. But on a completely new front, the Messiah is actually about to arrive on the scene, in a way that fulfills hopes, but in a way beyond what was previously imagined.

It's hard to imagine the place of unknowing at the beginning of the story. Our anticipation is a reenactment of theirs. Preparing the way of the Lord is going to require more than it may seem at first glance. John the Baptist is a forerunner. He is bold and maybe a little bit weird, as most of the prophets probably were, and not afraid to lead the way in brave proclamation. It requires special vision to be the one clearing the way when the one who is The Way is still just on the verge of entering the scene. Yet John the Baptist proceeded to prepare the way of the Lord without the certainty of hindsight.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord." I've had the opening song of the "Godspell" musical stuck in my head for a long time now. I would sing it for you, but my younger brother Jace took every single last one of the musical abilities from my family's gene pool. Instead, I'll paint for you the opening scene from the stage version. Before the musical opens, there is a small trickle of water dripping down onto the stage, just small drops falling one after the other; over the course of the opening number, the intensity of the stream grows, until the waterfall is being splashed all over the stage and flung out into the audience.

This brings to mind Pastor Rick walking through the aisles with our young people, splashing us with this life-giving liquid, helping us to remember our baptisms. Or in younger years, catching my breath as I excitedly sprint through the sprinkler with its icy cold but still refreshing spray. Or those moments when, for whatever number of reasons, it's been way too long since you've been able to take a shower. And you step into the flow at just the right temperature and just the right pressure and close your eyes for a few moments of healing and cleansing.

But there is a fine line between the beautiful and the destructive power of water, as so many in Puerto Rico, the island of Hispaniola, the Bahamas, Florida, Texas and elsewhere know all too vividly. That same movement of the water growing from a trickle can get to the point of becoming an unwelcome or even painful downpour. Rather than splashing in a fountain or observing the beauty of a majestic waterfall, we can sometimes get caught out in the downpour of rain with no shelter, or get swept up under the waterfall.

Sometimes the preparations we make in this season feel more like the overwhelming downfall. For those of us whose lives happen in semesters, maybe our preparing has little to do with Jesus and is focused on mustering the last little bits of mental energy we can scrounge up to make it to the end.

Maybe for some of us all the preparations for this joyous season to come fall on your shoulders alone and by the time you make it to Christmas, you're worn thin and have no more energy for the joy.

Maybe it's all you can do to prepare and brace yourself to turn on the news in the morning and wonder, "What's it going to be today?"

Or maybe some of us are fearfully and dreadfully preparing to face those family members who now reject who we are, or we're mourning the noticeably empty spaces around the table this year, or we're wondering how to ever get to the joy, when there is so much to lament. Whatever downpour is falling all around you now, we lament that with you.

For those of us whose slow leak in the ceiling has turned into a gushing downpour, drowning out their health and wellbeing, the promise of comfort in Isaiah comes for you. The mighty and gentle God comes to scoop you up and hold you in safe, warm, loving arms.

For those of us who need to summon the passion and the courage to flatten hills and lift up valleys, John the Baptist invites you on board. To jump into the wilderness waters of repentance and to catch the prophetic spark of excitement in preparing the way for the mighty gentle Messiah.

How can this Advent season give those of us who need it John's passion to prepare the way of the Lord? While we do get the benefit of being on the other side of the story, there are so many elements of the preparing that will require the same bold courage in the face of unknowns. We don't know how that family member will react to us when we confront their racist remarks. We don't know if our jobs will be secure when we speak out against the untouchable, unquestionable powers that be. We don't know who will befriend us if we continue to challenge assumptions and otherwise ruin easy, surface-level conversations.

Advent is a season of waiting, yes. And sometimes preparing the way of the Lord is slow work, yes. But don't for a minute let that fool you into thinking we can't be wild-looking, prophetic types like John the Baptist, proclaiming the kingdom at hand in all its upside-downness and abrupt reversals. Splashing around in wilderness waters and furiously shoveling our way through the mountainsides. Starting off our new Christian year with energy and passion. Just as our king is paradoxically mighty and gentle, we can be wild in our waiting for the coming kingdom.