

## **To Dwell Among Us: For the Way**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Mark 1:1-8 on Sunday, December 10, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem*

### I.

Yesterday morning, as our family was getting ready to leave our house and head to church for the kids' Advent musical dress rehearsal, I told them that I'd be driving separately and would see them at church. You see, I had had a conversation with our co-director of this fabulous musical, Mary Kaylor, the day before, and she mentioned the need for an olive-skinned baby doll to be the Baby Jesus. No problem, I told her. I'll pick it up and bring it to church.

So as we prepared to load up, I reminded my kids, "tell Ms. Mary and Mr. Jake that I'll be right behind y'all, that Baby Jesus is on the way!"

"Mom," I heard with withering sarcasm. "Baby Jesus isn't on the way, Baby Jesus is at TARGET."

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ!

### II.

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," Mark writes as this first gospel begins. Abrupt and direct, a no-fluff urgent storyteller of the Jesus story of God, Mark orients us to Jesus in his own stripped-down way. Unlike the dreams and announcements and wise men of Matthew, unlike the pregnant Mary and shepherds and angels and Bethlehem of Luke, unlike the timeless Word made flesh of John, Mark's picture of Jesus's origin story starts at the beginning.

Interestingly, this opening line connects us with the other beginnings called out in scripture — the beginning in Genesis when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the beginning in John when the Word was with

God and the word was God. In each, the reader is invited into the wonder of creation, the darkness and void and wilderness out of which comes order and light and good news. Something new is emerging; some fundamental reorientation of what we know is taking place; something new is birthed into life; something that is not yet done. So too, Mark says, is the coming of Jesus Christ in the world! The story of Jesus that will unfold in Mark's voice in all its miracle-working, healing and preaching and teaching goodness is just the beginning!

But where is that beginning? Mark places the beginning, the creation, the reorientation and remaking in the wilderness. Not in the temple or the church, not in a packed arena or filled lecture hall, not in a seat of power or a legislative chamber, not on a battlefield or boardroom. In the wilderness the beginning begins! Scholars tell us that Isaiah and Mark's wilderness is like an uninhabited area – a desolate expanse, rocky and rolling, where life is fragile and precarious. Where paths aren't made and marked, but must be straightened and leveled and made straight. Where all we imagine to comfort and console and accompany us are stripped away, laying bare the sustaining presence of God who enters in with a tender word: 'comfort, o comfort ye my people.'

And about that prophetic world. John the Baptist, we call him, the voice crying out, the one with camel's hair and locusts and honey and a holy dip into the baptismal waters of grace. People came to John, Mark tells us, traveling from city and countryside, leaving behind their lives and their lists and their busyness and their longings. For somehow his invitation was one they couldn't ignore, one whose offer of forgiveness was just too compelling to

brush off. Jesus hadn't yet come to them to dwell; rather, the people had to come to John and with him, heard a call to repent.<sup>1</sup>

Repentance, or *metanoia* in the Greek, means a turning, a leaving behind of what was and an embrace of what could be, a whole-self reorientation toward God. Repentance is not about guilt or shame, but rather stepping off the daily treadmill, changing direction, and committing to live differently. I don't think it's an accident that such a call comes in the wilderness when all the familiar anchors to which the people clung had been left behind and alone they came to John, ready to risk what they knew for that which they longed to learn. "I baptize you with water," John says to those who come to the wilderness waters longing for healing, "but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

To the world around us, these images of beginning, of wilderness and wild-haired John, of repentance and return must feel so disjointed and odd. For on our way to Bethlehem, must we traverse through the desert? On our way to decking the halls and having a holly jolly Christmas, must we heed the call to repent and turn? On our way to the end of this long and terribly hard year, must we reorient toward the beginning? When our way is filled with bad news or old news or fake news or 24/7 news, must we listen for the good news? On our feeds and in our feelings filled with war, must we be a people of peace?

### III.

In the two months since the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas upon the people of Israel, the world has watched in horror at the unfolding in Israel and Gaza. War crimes. Hundreds held hostage. Terror invading places of joy

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/column/first-words/eerie-call-john-baptist>

and safety and healing. Hospitals and homes bombed. Loss of basic needs, of hope and a future, of beloved mothers and children, of families and faith. No food, water, safe shelter, sanitation. Atrocities everywhere you turn.

Accusations flung. Dizzying fear that has seized a region, leaving unbridled hatred in its aftermath. Among we who watch, helpless and heartsick, we respond out of our grief or misunderstanding or distraction or slumber or hot, righteous anger coursing away from the horrors and tearing a path right here in our midst through people, through friendships, through schools and communities of faith, and neighborhoods, and families.

What we watch in horror is war at its clearest, most violent end. And as utterly tragic as it is, it is but one of countless wars we live among. It seems no matter where we look and what perspective we carry, someone is under attack: some people group is being targeted, some idea is being assaulted, some idea is being legislated purely out of retribution and revenge. War invades in totality; it grieves the heart of God.

And here we sit, in a beautiful room, surrounded by kind and gentle friends, with Christmas presents in our Amazon carts and a holiday to do list we're making and checking twice, doing the best we can with what we have, speaking... *peace*... while the world is on fire?<sup>2</sup> We're to step into the wilderness and look toward John, feel his call to turn and return, and make straight the pathway to Jesus... with all *this* going on? We're to wait and prepare for the coming Christ with *war* in the background?

#### IV.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to my friend, Kathey Golightly Sanders, for saying this so plainly in Highland Baptist Church's Advent devotional from this morning, December 10:  
[https://account-media.s3.amazonaws.com/27408/uploaded/a/0e16841743\\_1701114671\\_advent-2023-december-10-kathey-golightly-sanders.pdf](https://account-media.s3.amazonaws.com/27408/uploaded/a/0e16841743_1701114671_advent-2023-december-10-kathey-golightly-sanders.pdf)

Think with me about the warring places. I don't just mean where actual war unfolds, this war, or Russia and Ukraine's war, or Sudan's war, all as grievous and devastating as they are, but also too the warring places of your life. I wonder – where in your life has war dislocated you from peace?

Are you at war with your body, wishing it would look a different way, or move like it did years ago, or rid itself of the disease threatening to swallow you whole, or punishing it into a submission you can never seem to find?

Are you at war with your mind, lamenting the thoughts that race unhindered, or wishing that this torturous idea or that rampant anxiety would just let you be, or longing to float freely without the rage engulfing you, or yearning for memories lost with age?

Are you at war in your relationships, disjointed with envy or disturbed by hurt, worrying yourself sick over this person or feeling consumed with thoughts about that one, weary from caregiving and the emotional labor you carry every day?

Are you at war with the state of the world, invaded by the noise of the news, unable to look away or stop scrolling when titans tumble, or politicians lie, or institutions break apart, or the departure from truth and reality as we know it devastates every last corner of our living?

These kinds of war shut us down, tear us apart, break us wide open with despair. Yet to us who are at war, it's not trite nor trivial to lean toward the way of Jesus, that which is the way of peace. Peace, that is not just a tranquility maintained by distraction or nonchalance, but a *shalom* of body and spirit, of relationships and community, of humanity and our creator.

Dr. King gave us some language for peace in our communities in his paradigm-shifting “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” that we read together last

winter, where he addressed the white clergy who advised him in his work of civil rights to move slowly, patiently toward the end, those, in his words, “who prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”<sup>3</sup> Not a negative peace in the absence of conflict, but a positive peace which holds the promise of genuine liberation. That positive peace can only be found when we confront the things that make for war, the gaps and breaches and sins that dislocate us from God, from the image of God within us, from the image of God within one another.

Perhaps there’s been no better illustration of this positive peace which is the presence of justice than the nativity heard ‘round the world.<sup>4</sup> I bet you’ve seen it. You see, all the Christian churches in Palestine have canceled their festive Christmas observances this year in the midst of war. But the Lutheran Church of Bethlehem decided to mark the place and posture of Jesus in their nativity, placing the Baby Jesus in a manger of rubble and destruction. “If Christ were to be born today,” Reverend Munther Isaac said, “he would be born under the rubble.” And, the story continues, while the nativity represents “the reality of Palestinian lives, it also reflects hope as the infant Jesus is born in the rubble, a new light amidst pain.”

A way where there is no way.

A positive peace which makes for justice.

A turn from the ways of death toward the ways of life.

*The beginning of the good news.*

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*,

<https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> This story has been reported in many different places. I used this particular source from Al Jazeera:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/7/if-christ-were-born-today-he-would-be-born-under-rubble-israeli-bombing>

Father Greg Boyle offers us an invitation: “During Advent, we’re called to prepare the way...to ‘make straight the path’ and make smooth what is rocky. Our hardwiring is such that we hear these invitations as a demand to ‘straighten up’ or ‘get our act together.’ But it’s not we who need changing—it’s our crooked path that needs to be smoothed...so we can be reached by God’s tenderness.”<sup>5</sup>

Friends, I struggle to reach toward peace when war and rumors of war feel like they press in from every corner. Perhaps you do too. But for me, this is the way of Peace I can understand. This is the darkness and void and wilderness out of which comes order and light and good news. The **way of peace** that flattens mountains and raises valleys and smooths what’s rocky and makes clear the path. The **positive peace** where justice is made known in and through us. The **return to peace** we experience when we turn from that which invades and inflames, and turn instead toward that which brings life. The peace of a tender, comforting God who’s eager to reach us with love. The beginning of good news yet again.

## V.

“Let there be peace on earth,” the song proclaims, “and let it begin with me!” In the warring places of your life and the warring places of our world, I invite us all to consider: where can peace begin for me? Where can repentance begin for me? Where can the Way begin for me?

I wonder what it might look like for us this year, if we welcomed the comfort and the tenderness of God that comes to us in this warring year. What if you risked meeting John the Baptist there, ready to immerse you in the Love of the One who comes to set you free? What if you turned, not out

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<sup>5</sup> Father Greg Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*, p18-19.

of guilt but because of grace? What if such a repentance set you free in ways you never imagined possible? What if our church became a laboratory for peace, a place where we embrace the turning and celebrate justice and do the shared work of flattening mountains and filling valleys; where we pass the peace of Christ to one another, we look each other in the eyes and commit ourselves to the risk of love that relationships demand? What if peace began with you and you and you and me?

What if? Well it might just be the beginning of the good news. Amen!