

Title: Preparing for the Good News

Date: 12/10/2023 (Advent 5, formerly known as Advent 2, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 40:1-11](#); [2 Peter 3:8-15a](#); [Mark 1:1-8](#); [Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Advent-5-sermon-Preparing-for-the-Good-News-e2d2rg4>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/uBuxo-p7HEY?t=1625>

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mk 1:1)
Amen.

That is the first verse of the first chapter of the gospel according to Mark. Many Biblical scholars agree that this is the oldest of all the gospels. The word “gospel” mean good news, and it’s worth noticing that the good news doesn’t start with the birth of Jesus. It doesn’t even start with the striking figure of John the Baptizer, dressed in camel’s hair, locusts in one hand and honey in the other. The good news contains words from the prophet Malachi, considered the last of the Old Testament prophets. The good news starts with the prophet Isaiah, with words recorded 150 years into the Babylonian exile.

The good news emerges from a low point in the history of the people of Israel. They are spoken out of faith and hope, not the certainty of promises fulfilled. Set against the backdrop of a longer time horizon, that low point becomes a turning point. They thought their story might have ended there, but what happened later showed that this was where the next chapter began.

The way we prepare for a birth is different from the way we prepare for a death. But what if we prepare for the birth of a new human being or a new thing as we would for death? After all, it does involve dying to old identities and expectations and ways of being.

And what if we prepare for death as we would a birth? For there is a lightness that comes with shedding our burdens and the pressure of our roles to focus on just the moment right in front of us and maybe the moment immediately after that.

These are the kinds of tension we are invited to hold in the season of Advent, the season it feels like we’re told to “Hurry up and wait.” Or as Peter puts it in today’s epistle, we ask ourselves what sorts of persons we ought to be in order to **hasten and wait** for the coming of the day of God.¹

As we prepare to remember and reenact the first coming of Christ in the person of Jesus, we are also waiting for the Second Coming. We look for God to tear open the heavens and come down, for the Son of Man to walk through the clouds. Images associated with the Second Coming are often seen as signs of an impending apocalypse.

When it comes to TV shows and books and movies, the word “apocalypse” brings to mind destruction, despair, and dystopia. My mind goes to Godzilla and zombies and

asteroids. I associate “apocalypse” with movies like the Hunger Games, Terminator, Matrix, even Wall-E.

However, according to Professor L. Michael White at UT Austin, the word apocalypse means “revelation”, that which is uncovered. “It comes from the Greek word which literally means to pull the lid off something.”² It’s not so much about the end of the world as it is about the end of the world...as we know it.

An apocalypse reveals the truth about what is, and it says something about us humans that we connect seeing the truth about the world with these nightmare scenarios. If we try to simplify the message behind these movies, we might say that Wall-E shows us what happens when we consume resources without thinking about the actual cost to our earth and our bodies; recycling and re-using are good, but that’s not the same as not using those resources in the first place. Terminator is about the dangers of Artificial Intelligence and giving it and maybe technology in general so much control over our lives. The Matrix invites us to question whether we are choosing to live in a dream or seeing and interacting with reality for what it actually is. The Hunger Games challenges the motive behind those who produce and those who consume all kinds of entertainment and distractions.

Where is the good news in these stories? Wall-E sort of has a happy ending but that’s probably because it’s a Disney movie. The other stories are about individual survival and small victories, but it doesn’t feel like things really change.

So, what does it mean when the readings for Advent from last Sunday and this one pair images of apocalypse with the promise of good news?

It tells us that the good news didn’t begin with Jesus; he has come to reveal the good news, to show us that it is already here and has been here all along. He’s not the beginning of the chapter but the words in bold followed by exclamation points in the middle of it.

It means that our salvation is rooted in the history of the relationship between God and the people of God. So, we have heard the good news not only once but many times because it doesn’t just come in a single moment or through a single person; there have been and will be other messengers who prepare the way.

Since St. Alban’s is now situated next to a construction zone, when I see the words “preparing your way” and “make his paths straight” my mind goes to diggers and cement trucks, I see trees being cut down and earth paved over.

But Jesus built on the past; he didn’t burn or tear everything down to start from a blank slate. The wilderness isn’t something we need to fear; the good news is that God and God’s messengers will meet us there. Our life does not have to be defined by sin; the good news is that with God’s help we can make the turn toward salvation, and it’s ok if we need to make that turn not just once but many times. He showed us that we already

have what we need for the *next* end...and for the *next* beginning, that God will walk beside us through *all* our ends and *all* our beginnings.

Advent is the time we look back at this year and at all the years that have passed to examine the paths that have been prepared for us.

This past Wednesday, December 6th, was the 40th anniversary of the first Holy Eucharist of St. Alban's. It took place in a beer hall on Menchaca, and the women's bathroom doubled as the sacristy, the place they prepared the sacred vessels for Communion.

40 years later, we are here because of this path that they and those who came after them have prepared. We have a place where the light of God shines through these windows and through us. Here, the Spirit of God moves in and among us so that we can take the Word of God straight into our hearts and out beyond these walls.

Advent is the time we look back at this year and at all the years before us to examine how the principles applied to making a path straight, to making a path accessible to those who find themselves in valleys and to those walking on top of mountains and hills.

Making paths accessible isn't just about sharing stories of success; this is also about speaking out of our struggles, the times we've felt like we've been in exile, the times we got lost in valleys or couldn't catch our breaths on mountains and hills. There are some really dark moments in the Bible; there are stories we don't like to retell, parts of the Psalms that we don't like to say. There are shadow sides to our world and ourselves that we don't like to talk about or examine.

And, this is important. Lament helps to reveal the world as it is. No one is alone in feeling broken, in yearning to be able to have even a tiny bit of hope and faith when it feels like the exile will never end. It is important that we sit with lament, and not try to overpower it with bright lights and loud cheer and false hope. Lament highlights the struggles we share when it comes to feeling sharply the absence of God. It lays bare the gap between how near and how here the Kingdom of Heaven is. It shows us the cracks in need of repair.

We can see those cracks as bad news. We can feel that weight until they break and bury us. But if we ignore them, if we try not to see them, the cracks will keep growing and the world will become more and more dystopian.

Or we can see the cracks as good news. Now that they have been revealed, we can work toward repair. Now that we can talk about them, we might be able to ask for and accept help. Now that we know what they look like we can expand our time horizon and look for the times in our lives and in the lives of God's people that God has walked at our side.

To close, I share these words from the Most Rev. Hosam Naoum, Archbishop in Jerusalem. In his letter to Christians around the world, he writes, "We are all concerned about the future and feel fear and uncertainty. But our faith is stronger than these

anxieties and leads us to continue our ministries through our churches and institutions as a living witness. Indeed, every ministry we offer is nothing but a continuation of Jesus' ministry on earth. For he is the teacher, healer, and Savior. He continues to work through us as individuals and as a Church. Advent offers us a time for renewing these ministries, as well as for rededicating our individual and communal talents and spiritual devotions to God.”³

This is the good news of Advent.

Amen.

¹ 2 Peter 3:8-15a

² <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/brevelation.html>

³ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/508348/Daily-Meditations-Booklet-Combined.pdf>