



SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT – SERMON
THE REV. DR. SARAH TRAVIS

Mark's gospel begins with the prophet Isaiah.

The good news of this story does not begin with this story,
but has been under production for hundreds of years.

Actually, the story of Jesus Christ has been in production since the beginning of time.

John the Baptist is another prophetic voice,
calling for change among God's people,
inviting people to prepare for Jesus.

Why does anyone have to prepare to receive Jesus?

As the Son of God, can he not simply appear and begin to do his thing?

Absolutely. God can choose to act any way God wants.

But the people of God, at least the ones John was talking to, they need some
preparation.

Their idea of what it means to wait for a Messiah needs to be reshaped.

If they are waiting for God to break in to the present and save them from their
enemies,

if they are waiting for a warrior messiah who will slay their oppressors,

They are in for a surprise.

That is not the kind of messiah John is announcing.

The phrase "Son of God" is itself provocative;

in the first century, the title was reserved for the Roman Emperor.

If Jesus is the Son of God, then the Emperor is not.

Mark wants us to know that Jesus is coming to challenge the existing authorities
to challenge the oppression inflicted by Rome during the Jewish War with Rome,

But not in the way that people expect.

Everything John proclaims indicates that Jesus as Messiah



The Presbyterian Church in Canada
{Advent 2: Mark 1:1-8}

will be very different from what the people are expecting.

It will take some convincing to persuade people to change their expectations so that they are able to recognize this surprising messiah in their midst.

John the baptizer is not a smooth operator.

He is not coiffed, not slick.

In fact, we might wonder why anyone would listen to him at all.

A wilderness dweller, perhaps a wanderer,
dressed in animal skin – camel hair does not sound comfortable!

He eats the fruit of the land – including bugs.

It is clear that he is not backed by any authorities, by any influential group, surely if he was, he would have a better infrastructure for making his announcement. He is a lone voice, asking people to do something very difficult for human beings – to change their minds. Change their hearts. Change their behaviour. Change their attitudes.

Repent.

John was proclaiming God's forgiveness, and inviting people into a new kind of relationship with God,

a relationship sealed with water – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Quite frankly, it's hard to imagine that this was something that people would want to do.

And yet the gospel tells us that the people came – they flocked to this strange man in that lonely place, because they were longing for change – yearning for it.

The lives they were living were not sustainable – they suffered. And they were ready to do something to change their reality.

John is very clear that he is not the messiah – he is not the one they are waiting for. His job is to point to Jesus,



The Presbyterian Church in Canada
{Advent 2: Mark 1:1-8}

to prepare the way for people to recognize Jesus when his ministry begins.
He claims to be unworthy to put on Jesus' shoes.
His only tool is water. Jesus, the Son of God, will bring the fire of the Holy Spirit.
Maybe John didn't seem so strange to the crowds who gathered
in the early part of the 1st century.
By our standards, he is a bit of a wild character – a bit sketchy.
Why should his words matter to us today?
Should we listen to John? And what do his words mean to us in the year 2017?
The Gospel of Luke tells us what Jesus' mother Mary did after receiving the news
of her pregnancy.
She went to visit her cousin Elizabeth – she went quickly –
clearly she had a lot to talk about with her friend,
As both found themselves unexpectedly expecting.
It is such a lovely story – as soon as she sees Mary,
Elizabeth knows that the baby is not an ordinary baby.
How does Elizabeth know?
Because her baby leaps in her womb – a greeting, perhaps, to his cousin.
And so John and Jesus meet for the first time.
Even as a fetus, John was able to recognize Jesus.
And so, as a grown man in the wilderness,
His words carry weight – John knows in his soul
that Jesus is the one God has promised.
John knows what he is talking about.
He knows that people need preparation if they are to be able to recognize Jesus.

We are in the midst of preparing for Christmas.
For Christians In Western culture, this means we are up to our eyeballs
in recipes and decorations.
More importantly, essentially for our faith development,



The Presbyterian Church in Canada
{Advent 2: Mark 1:1-8}

we are in a time of waiting, a time of wondering,
and at time of preparation.

Is there anything that will stand in the way of enabling us to recognize Jesus?

It is easy to recognize the baby Jesus – sweet and tender,
calling us to gentle acts of kindness and worship.

We love the carols, the nativity plays. And those things are wonderful.

It is much more difficult, in this season, to recognize the grown-up Jesus.

The one who made countercultural decisions and made everyone mad.

The Jesus who reshaped the historical trajectory of human understanding of God –
who challenged oppression, captivity, poverty –

who crossed boundaries and renamed who was acceptable before God.

Jesus, who died in love for the world –

And wrestled with the power of death and won.

In Advent, we prepare not only for the baby,
but for the astonishing God who breaks into history,
time and time again, to transform everything,

To turn everything upside down.

To turn us upside down.

Repentance means, in part, to turn toward Jesus –

To turn away from the sins that separate us from God and from each other –
the painful violence that rips apart communities,

The more subtle violence of poverty,

the ways we damage our earth.

We turn toward Jesus, and we find life.

Can we ever really be ready to encounter such a force of life
in all its brilliance and magnitude?

We can begin by remembering our baptism –
the water that flows through us,

forming our identity as God's beloved children.



The Presbyterian Church in Canada
{Advent 2: Mark 1:1-8}

That water strengthens us to lay down our fears about change,
our fear about transformation.

It prepares our hearts to be open
to a future that we haven't expected,
to a messiah that will turn us upside down and inside out.

We will have to let go of some things if we want to fully experience the gift
we are being given in the person of Jesus Christ.

And yet, there is nothing more important, more life-giving
nothing else that will save our lives.

So let us listen to the voice of the one calling us out of our bondage,
out of our sorrow,
out of our night.

Into the glorious light of the world.