



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
December 10th, 2017
Sermon: "Free Spirit"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

Looking around the room this morning, I think it's safe to say:
we could all use some "good news" these days. *Am I right?*
It's been another week of heart-wrenching headlines:

"At least Fifteen Peacemakers Killed in the Congo"
"U.S. Faces Withering Criticism Over Jerusalem Decree"
"Storm Deaths in Puerto Rico may be Vastly Underestimated"
"Under New Tax Plan the Cost of Aging Could Rise"
"New Blaze Breaks out in San Diego County"

Sifting through the latest news stories, it can be hard to get into the holiday spirit.
It feels paradoxical at times to be holding the newspaper or our phones,
processing the many troubles of our world,
while listening to Elvis Presley croon "Silver Bells" in the background.

The headlines read:

"Heavy Snow Catches Western North Carolina By Surprise"
"Texas Prisons Ban 10,000 books. No Charlie Brown Christmas for Inmates"
"My Generation thought Women were Empowered. Did we Deceive Ourselves?"
"Asheville caterer charged with felony embezzlement"

Sometimes these stories are just too much to bear.

We have to step away.

We become numb.

We pray for healing.

And when our children ask us why there is so much evil in the world, we answer the only
way we know how: "I don't know." "I guess it's just the way things are."

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But our text this morning offers us a vastly different headline.

One that feels wholly unfamiliar in the midst of such a fraught season.

It reads:

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (period)"

This headline, which harkens back to Genesis, stands alone at the start of Mark's gospel.

It's unusual. And it certainly captures our attention. Mark gets straight to the point, readies us for what's to come next. What you are about to read is something good, something new, something that can transform the world - and hey, it's only the beginning.

There is a feeling of Advent urgency about it. No time to mention Luke's angel visiting Mary, or to make space for Matthew's long list of Jesus's ancestors, or to share John's words about the timeless harmony between Father and Son.

Mark is a good news reporter and the good news is right here, right now for us to embrace and to participate in.

He goes on:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Using the words of the prophet Isaiah, Mark awakens us from our Advent slumber, from our passive waiting, and calls us to action.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ needs to continue and we are needed "to prepare the way of the Lord and to make the paths straight." *But how are we to do this?*

What feels most pressing appears to be absent from the text. Does this mean that the paths we walk now are somehow bent or broken? Is the world "as we know it" not the world that God has intended for us? And if not, then how will we ever be able to straighten the path?

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We are certainly aware that we live in a world that is far from perfect. Throughout history and still today war and conflict abound.

Our daily headlines remind us that there is a great absence of empathy and unity across the aisle and across the globe. And those in power too often feel entitled to take advantage of the most vulnerable among us.

We know that we live in a time where justice still feels like an uphill climb, where the home we are born into, the shade of skin we bear, our gender, sexuality, class, even our religion still impact our access to certain freedoms.

And we know that we struggle in our own personal ways too. We experience relationships that wither, illnesses that return, jobs that feel dissatisfying, transitions that are daunting.

This is the way the world is – it’s a hard and difficult path.
Yes, perhaps it is bent, maybe even broken,
but we are taught to accept it - it’s just the “way things are.” *Right?*

This brokenness is nothing new. While the gospel of Mark was being composed, a war was underway. Jerusalem was under siege. A group of Jewish rebels were revolting against their Roman oppressors. There was increased conflict brewing between Jews and Gentiles, as well as Jews and Jewish Jesus followers.

Mark was writing in the midst of a community divided, a world bending all around. Perhaps this gospel was meant to open peoples’ eyes: to finally see the brokenness and to believe that a new path could somehow, someday be possible.

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A few months ago, our Racial Justice Book club here at Grace Covenant read Michelle Alexander’s book: “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.” In it, she argues that today the mass incarceration of primarily black and brown bodied people has created a new caste system – one as devastating as that of Jim Crow. Many of us cannot see it, it’s barely spoken about on the news, it’s difficult to challenge and to change.

She writes that today people of color continue to be disproportionately targeted, searched, and arrested. There are now more African American men in the correctional system than were ever enslaved in this country. And when those imprisoned are finally able to go free, many are left feeling still behind bars – unable to receive food stamps or government assistance, unable to find decent work, unable to vote.¹

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.” It seems that we as a nation are being lulled to sleep in the midst of a system that is broken and in desperate need of repair.

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

But how are we able to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ in our time?

Scripture tells us that just as God sends an unlikely king, God also sends the most unlikely messenger. Clothed in camel skin, eating locusts and honey, John sounds less like a radiant prophet coming to deliver the message of Jesus Christ and more like a buddy who’d get a kick out of our Asheville drum circle.

And maybe that’s the point. John’s purpose is to be disarming in order to connect with us. He is an enthusiastic, down-to-earth servant of God – and we are drawn to him.

Through the waters of baptism, he calls us to do what is most difficult - repent for our sins and seek forgiveness.

Now, confession and sin might not sound like headlines for “good news,” but if we read between the lines, we realize that John is teaching us how to recognize the brokenness in ourselves and in the world around.

For when we recognize this brokenness – when we really do - we may also recognize our need for God to help put the pieces back together.

We recognize the urgency of Advent.

We see the necessity to construct a path for Christ to enter into the wilderness of our lives and to completely shift the world as we know it.

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When I think about the words “*Prepare the way of the Lord,*” I cannot help but think about the musical, *Godspell*. Some of you may have seen it or even been in a production of it at some point. The film version came out in 1973 and it is this whimsical, big-haired, bellbottomed retelling of Jesus’s journey with his disciples.

The movie begins with a shaggy haired, John the Baptist standing in a fountain in Central Park, calling people to come to him and be baptized in the water. Now, as someone who lived in New York City, I have to say: I am 100% sure that the river Jordan is much cleaner than this particular fountain. But I digress.

In this opening scene, folks of all colors and stripes are hearing John’s call. They abandon their jobs and plans, and they come running to him to be baptized.

As the film continues on, you quickly realize that the disciples are singing and dancing on the streets of New York City – but for some reason it’s now completely empty. There’s no traffic, no mobs of people, no littering, no police, no crime. The busy big apple is suddenly a tender intimate space. It is transformed into something wholly new and unfamiliar and Jesus Christ is tap dancing at the center of it.

But perhaps the most stirring moment of the film comes after Christ is crucified on a chain link fence. Through their tears, the disciples find the courage to sing that gathering song once more.

It starts off soft at first – just one voice - but it grows louder and stronger: “*Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.*”ⁱⁱ

Their song celebrates the notion that we are each called by God, equipped to prepare the way and to share the headline: the Savior is coming to set us all free!

But how can we ever really make the path straight for God’s arrival?

In a world of such brokenness, even if we see it, even if we name it, even if we share about it, it can still feel all too impossible to really change the course of things.

John the Baptist tells the crowd around him:
"I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit: that which descends on Jesus at his baptism,
that which casts out demons in the wilderness,
that which equips Christ's disciples for trial.

The Holy Spirit is that divine force that unites us with Christ today.
It is what helps us understand God's call for our lives. It is what empowers us to enter into
Christ's imagination and journey down a path that exceeds our every expectation.

It is the Holy Spirit, present in the waters of baptism that connects the beginning - and the
present - and the future. It is the promise that we have everything we need right now to
mend the brokenness and to make the path straight for Christ to enter into our lives.

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At the most recent GCPC 20/30s gathering, renowned theologian, Carter Heyward spoke to
us about the power of the Holy Spirit to bring healing and wholeness to a world divided.

"The Spirit draws us into honest engagement with one another." She says, "this includes
those who may be different from us in various ways. God calls us to wake up and learn how
to love and respect one another. Period."

As one of the first women ever ordained as a priest in the Episcopal church, Carter knows
much about what it means to repair a broken path. A queer woman and an activist, she has
dedicated her life to making way for Christ's justice and healing to enter in.

During our gathering, I asked her: "With all that is going on in the world today and on the
news, how do you know where to begin when it comes to working for justice? How do you
not freeze up?"

Carter said with a smile, "Go where your passion is. Trust in where you are feeling called –
and give yourself over completely to that work. Then have faith that those around you will
do their part as well."

Her words were a bold reminder that we cannot prepare the way alone.
We need God's direction and each other's hands.

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'

This is our individual and collective Advent call,
our purpose since the very beginning and onward till the end of time.
This is the headline that we accept, that we trust, that we follow.
This is the headline that claims our lives and invites us to imagine the world anew.

*“15 Peacemakers Killed in the Congo”
“Prepare the way of the Lord”*

*“New Blaze Breaks out in San Diego”
“Prepare the way of the Lord”*

*“Heavy Snow Catches North Carolina”
“Prepare the way of the Lord”*

Friends, the good news is this: Ready or not, Jesus is coming. Jesus is already here. Period. The Gospel of Mark tells us Christ is Lord.

The prophet Isaiah calls us to ready the path
The baptizer John opens our eyes to the brokenness
The Holy Spirit empowers us to do the impossible

And Christ Jesus invites us to participate in the holy work of God.
Might we have the faith to prepare the way for a Savior,
who is bringing freedom to the broken places
and transforming the world - as we know it - for good.

ⁱ Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New

ⁱⁱ Dir: David Greene. *Godspell*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. 1973