

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Second Sunday of Advent**  
**Sunday, December 3, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Mark 1:1-8

Theme: Those who dream...prepare the way (Peace)

[prayer]

Because today is technically the first Sunday in Advent, but we went liturgically rogue this year, I am obliged to wish you all a Happy Church New Year!

I love the fresh possibilities of another year, and this includes a new year in the church calendar. I am dreaming and scheming about what we may accomplish together this year. What traditions will we resurrect? What new things will we try? Which new people will we reach and who will we be blessed to serve? How will we deepen our commitment to personal and social holiness?

Above all I am praying that God's dreams will grow deeper roots in each of us, outmaneuvering our own plans and expectations with surprising grace and joy. When God's dreams supplant our own it doesn't always immediately feel like good news. But in the long run, God's dreams are always good news for us and for the world.

Mark's gospel opens with an audacious proclamation: "The *beginning* of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son" (v. 1 CEB). If you were among Mark's first-century audience, you might wonder how the story of a man who was executed for insurrection could possibly be good news. But for Mark the cross is good news because of what it represents: God's deliverance.

This good news does not actually begin with Jesus. The gospel was proclaimed first by the Hebrew prophets. This is why Mark does not begin his gospel with Jesus' genealogy or birth, but instead quotes an ancient prophecy. Two prophecies, to be exact. Malachi prophesied a messenger who would prepare the way for God (cf. Mal 3:1). Isaiah prophesied a voice shouting in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight” (v. 3; cf. Isa 40:3). This straight path was a vision of a highway through the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem that would lead the Jewish exiles home.

But the “way” that both Malachi and Isaiah announce is not primarily a road through the desert. The Way is God’s Law – God’s ethics – a good but difficult way of living. Jesus came to earth as a living, breathing example of the Way. When the earliest Christians heard the opening words of Mark’s gospel, they heard a call to form in themselves the mind of Jesus so that they could live as he did. The first followers of Jesus didn’t call themselves Christians; instead, they called themselves followers of the Way (cf. Acts 9:2). They walked the way of the gospel through the just and peaceful relationships they kept with each other and their neighbors.

This way of living sharply contrasted with the surrounding political culture of the time. Christianity began within the *Pax Romani* – the peace of Rome – a peace that was manufactured through military conquest. When the Roman legions would win a battle, heralds would proclaim throughout the empire the good news that the emperor’s peace had prevailed. But it wasn’t good news for everyone. It certainly wasn’t good news for the Jewish people living under Roman occupation. When Mark was writing his gospel in the year 70 CE, a war was raging in Israel. A group of radical Jews had revolted against Rome. The emperor punished the revolt by laying siege to Jerusalem. People in the city were dying of starvation and disease. Some Jews called for continued revolt, but others urged submission as the path to peace.

But one small sect refused to take sides. They were a group of Jews and Gentiles who followed a Galilean rabbi named Jesus, executed by Rome forty years prior. The followers of the Way believed that Jesus was the Son of God. Now Caesar was also known as the ‘Son of God.’ The title appeared on Roman coins next to his image. But the rule of Caesar was far from the rule of God’s Son, who rather than holding himself apart from the people and ruling on high, came to earth as a humble servant. He faithfully suffered on behalf of God’s beloved creation. His death on a cross was good news for the entire world because the peace he prophesied was fulfilled through an act of humility and suffering compassion, rather than conquest and oppression.

The opening line of Mark's gospel makes a bold political statement: That Jesus Christ is the true Son of God and therefore the rightful ruler of the world, not Caesar or any contemporary political power. God's dream is a dream of *Pax Christi*, the humble and compassionate peace of Christ ruling in the hearts of humanity. If we do not align our hearts with this dream, then we are automatically aligned with the oppressive forces of this world. For in Mark's gospel, there is no middle ground; you are either on the side of God or you are on the side of empire.

John the Baptist calls us to prepare the way for God's peaceable kingdom through a process of inward transformation. Peace does not come by accident. Our prayers for peace begin with our own hearts. What is not peaceful in *us* must be uprooted in repentance. For Mark and the Baptist and the Hebrew prophets that came before them, repentance is the beginning of the good news of deliverance.

The Baptist's message forces us to consider what good news we preach. Is it the false good news of wealth and unrestrained power, or is it the true good news of the just and peaceful Way that Jesus walked before us?

The Rev. Traci Blackmon, Associate General Minister in the United Church of Christ, writes this about John the Baptist's message: "Preparing the Lord's path means challenging systems and structures that we have institutionalized as normal but that God condemns as oppressive and crooked. It means clearing the path of self-aggrandizement, self-absorption, and greed to make way for a community where all of creation is valued."<sup>1</sup>

Peace comes when systems of power that oppress are transformed into systems that liberate. But transformed systems emanate from transformed individuals. Are we committed to regularly searching our hearts and rooting out our pride, selfishness, and ignorance, so that justice and mercy can flourish? Justice and mercy are the prerequisites to peace; any peace without justice is a false peace that favors the powerful over the oppressed. If our eyes are wide open to God's dreams, then we will see the ways that false and sinful versions of peace prevail in our world, the ways that violence against the poor and marginalized persist under a veneer of 'peace and tranquility.' If we want to share in God's dreams for a peaceable world, then we will, in the words of the psalmist, work for a world

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<sup>1</sup> Traci Blackmon. "Preparing the Way for Justice." Alliance for Fair Food. December 9, 2018. [allianceforfairfood.org/news/2018/12/2/growing-the-light-advent-reflection-week-2-preparing-the-way-for-justice-xkm9x](https://allianceforfairfood.org/news/2018/12/2/growing-the-light-advent-reflection-week-2-preparing-the-way-for-justice-xkm9x)

where justice and peace are married to each other (Ps 85:10). We will prepare the way in our hearts and relationships and neighborhoods for God’s dream of a just peace to become reality.

[pause]

On the first Sunday of Advent, we acknowledge the wreckage of our world. On the second Sunday we acknowledge our role in that wreckage. We hear John the Baptist’s exhortation echo down through the centuries: *Change your hearts and your lives*. The crowds gathered at the river Jordan, listening to John’s preaching, knew that the appearance of Jesus was a sign that God was drawing near to them. They chose to repent and be baptized in preparation for His coming.

God is drawing near once more, and so we must do the same. We prepare the way through confession and repentance. We remember our baptismal vows to turn away from sin and accept the freedom to follow God. This introspective work does not always feel like good news. We must face the truth about ourselves and ask for God to change the parts of us that do align with God’s kingdom ethics. We prepare the way for God through our conversion to the good news of God’s kingdom. This conversion is a gift of God’s grace. God draws near to us before we repent, sending His Spirit to convict our spirits.

How will we respond when the Spirit draws near? Will we summon the courage and strength to open our broken hearts to God’s healing grace and allow ourselves to be transformed in the way of peace?

Rev. Patricia de Jong, also of the UCC, offers us these words in Advent blessing:

“May peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation...[May] we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God’s reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world. Make straight in our hearts a highway for the possibility of peace.”<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia E. De Jong. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1. Advent Through Transfiguration*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. 4, 6.