



Liturgical Day: The Second Sunday in Advent  
Date: December 7, 2008  
Sermon Title: The Hard Road to Renewal

*A messenger sent  
The beginning of good news  
Prepare for the Lord*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There was this telephone call between a couple of my colleagues some time ago. One had been the Pastor of an old, inner city church. It was a beautiful church: one of those hundred-year-old, neo-gothic structures. It had huge stonework as its foundation. It was filled with beautiful art glass and statues. It had a thundering organ. When you entered the nave of that building, you felt as though you were, in a powerful way, in the very presence of God.

**The Painful  
Destruction of an  
Old Church**

But it was an old church — and badly in need of repair. The stained glass windows, once beautiful, were cracked and coming apart. The ceiling had leaks, causing water stains to darken the wallboard. The furnace was ancient, and it took a great deal of time and effort to keep it operating. It was a beautiful place to worship, but a terribly expensive facility to operate.

The phone call came late one evening, late enough to be unusual. On the other end of the line, my colleague spoke at a frantic pace. "The church, the old church, it is burning. The fire department is here. They don't think they can save it. It looks like it will be a complete loss!" It was shocking to imagine what was going on — the mind quickly pictured fire trucks and rescue vehicles surrounding the church, flames licking off the top of the roof, walls beginning to lean inwards, ready to collapse. The first reaction was compassion: "I'm so sorry. It must be a terrible loss." The answer was surprising, and punctuated with tears of joy: "No, no, you don't understand: it's the best news we've had all year! I am elated!" It seemed like bad news, but the truth is, it was good news.

That was the case for my colleague and her congregation, and it is the case for St. John the Baptizer and those who followed him out into the wilderness. St. Mark, in this morning's Gospel lesson, begins his version of the Jesus story. He has no time for angelic announcements. He has no time for trips to Elizabeth's home. He has no time for Nazareth and Bethlehem and the crowded inn, and the manger out back, and visits from traveling Magi, and hurried trips to Egypt, and family trips to the Temple in Jerusalem. He simply and starkly begins with these words: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ*. And what is that good news? Well, that is where the surprise comes. In the eight verses that serve as today's Gospel lesson, the good news that St. Mark presents to those of us who read it has to do with judgment and confession and repentance.

**John the Baptist's  
Fiery Preaching**

I don't know about you, but that hardly sounds like good news to me. I don't want to hear that God is angry with me: the possibility that my soul is in danger doesn't immediately sound like good news. I don't want to hear that I'm headed the wrong direction, and need to reorient myself: the call to repentance doesn't immediately sound like good news. I don't want to hear that I've done things that are wrong, and need to own up to them: the call to confession doesn't immediately sound like good news. But that's how St. Mark begins the story: with

FIRST LESSON  
**ISAIAH 40:1-11**  
PSALM  
**PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13**  
SECOND LESSON  
**2 PETER 3:8-15A**  
GOSPEL LESSON  
**ST. MARK 1:1-8**  
PRAYER OF THE DAY  
**STIR UP OUR HEARTS, LORD  
GOD, TO PREPARE THE  
WAY OF YOUR ONLY SON.  
BY HIS COMING  
STRENGTHEN US TO SERVE  
YOU WITH PURIFIED LIVES;  
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,  
OUR SAVIOR AND  
LORD, WHO LIVES AND  
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE  
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,  
NOW AND FOREVER.  
AMEN.**

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the confrontive preaching of St. John the Baptizer. Preaching that teaches about a God who judges. Preaching that calls his listeners to confession. Preaching that calls all believers to repentance. Yet St. Mark calls it good news — *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ!*

In order to see how repentance and confession and judgment can be *good news*, we first need to remember that it's no coincidence that this lesson comes to us at this time every year. This is a beautiful time of year. A time when people attend parties, mail greeting cards, share gifts, and decorate their homes. A time when people reach out to the world in charitable ways – seeming more aware of the needs that surround them than at any other time of the year. Yet during these weeks, the tradition of our church is not to celebrate Christmas with the rest of the society – it is to observe Advent. For hundreds, even a thousand years, Christians have traditionally used these four weeks to remember. We remember Israel's longing for the Messiah. We remember John the Baptizer's fiery preaching about repentance and confession and judgment. We remember Christ's promise to return. Advent, for Christians, is a time of waiting, and watching, and looking within.

## **Advent and Repentance**

The message of Advent is one that can bring not just good feelings that last for a season, but a deep and powerful joy that begins now and continues forever. The message of Advent intends to help us see our need for a Savior. That's what makes the preaching of John good news. He understood that when we realize we are not the people God would have us be – when we realize there is need for us to repent of our sinfulness – when we admit to having hurt others, and confess those sins... it's only then that we see most clearly our need for a Savior. It's only then that the message of God's deep love for us becomes good news. It's only then that the message about Jesus of Nazareth and his death and resurrection brings a joy that can last a lifetime and beyond.

During the season of Advent, the church is not just inviting us into a tradition for the sake of tradition. If that was the case, the whole enterprise would be meaningless. And Jesus' dying on the cross, as the Apostle said, would be nothing more than a joke. If we don't believe we need a Savior, this season is little more than a nostalgic trip to a bygone era.

But if we allow the season of Advent to move us to repentance; if we allow ourselves to realize that we do need to be put right with God – then the message about Jesus becomes a life-changing message for us. A message that is, indeed, good news.

This brings me back to the story about my colleague in the inner city church. <sup>i</sup> You see, my colleague was delighted that the church's building was burning down — and even more so that it looked to be irreparable. That inner city church had once been a huge congregation. They had hundreds of children in Sunday School. It was a bustling, active group of believers. But as people moved to the suburbs, the remnant of that congregation found it harder and harder to maintain the old building. They wanted to sell it, but couldn't find a buyer. They had talked about razing it, but couldn't make the choice to willfully destroy what so many loving hands had created. They were in a bind: they had a building that didn't serve their needs, and it looked very likely that it would put them out of business before they figured out how to do anything about it.

## **The Church and A New Life**

That's why the fire was such good news. The insurance payment would be phenomenal. It would allow them to remove the rubble of the destroyed building, and build something more suited to their present-day needs. The phone call was good news because even though it portrayed a frightening situation – one that would do a great deal of damage – it was a situation that might lead that congregation to make a break from its past and have a fresh, new start. They could abandon their efforts to maintain that old building, and now direct their energies towards a ministry that addressed the needs of their neighborhood. They saw in the harsh news of the fire's flames the opportunity to follow God's call into a new direction.

Finally, that is what John's message is all about. There is no making judgment and repentance and confession into something pleasant. Those are hard and painful experiences to face. It is natural to want to ignore them, and pretend that all is well with us. But when the brokenness of this world crashes into our living, and our words or our

## **Repentance and New Life**

<sup>i</sup> A story that, unfortunately, I heard so long ago that I can't remember who told it to me, or whom it involved.

actions create distance between us, or between God and us, judgment and repentance and confession are tools that can help put it back together again. They become instruments of good news, even if they are instruments that cause us pain as they do their work. They become opportunities for God's grace to have its way with us. As judgment strikes home, as we are moved to repentance, as we reach out in confession, renewal becomes a possibility – new life takes root – and the work of Christ is done among us. That's what it means to follow after this One whose birth in Bethlehem announces a new kingdom, and whose resurrection in Jerusalem announces new life. It means to receive this message of John: that we need to look hard at how God judges us. It means to receive this message of John: that repentance is the only honest response to an experience of God's presence. It means to receive this message of John; that through confession and forgiveness, God desires to renew our relationships, give us a fresh start, and work the miracle of new life among us.

While John's harsh words about repentance and confession and judgment may be uncomfortable to our ears, they do encourage us to see our need for forgiveness; our need for renewal; our need for a Savior. And they help us to discover that place within us that can only be filled by a relationship with the Lord, Jesus Christ; the One whose power is able to give us a new beginning with each other and with God.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 2, 2009)

Gospel Lesson (English Text): <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>1.1</sup> The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' " <sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>iii</sup>

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

<sup>1.1</sup> Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ]. <sup>2</sup> Καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἠσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸπροσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου <sup>3</sup> φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ, <sup>4</sup> ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς φεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. <sup>5</sup> καὶ ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες, καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν. <sup>6</sup> καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι γριον. <sup>7</sup> Καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων ῥηταὶ ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς κύψας λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ. <sup>8</sup> ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html)

<sup>iii</sup> St. Mark 1:1-8, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iv</sup> St. Mark 1:1-8, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).