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“Prepare the Way”

Mark 1: 1-8

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This is where the Gospel of Mark begins. Not with a lovely story of the birth of Jesus as in Luke and Matthew. Not with the beginning of everything as in John. But with John the Baptist evoking the prophets of old, calling for repentance, foretelling of one more powerful who is to come. The former pastor of my church in Oakland frequently pined about how he would love to have a purely Markan Christmas some year. Or perhaps it was just a Markan Advent or Christmas pageant or something of the sort.

I don't know why I never asked him what he meant by that. (Probably because I was in seminary at the time and thought I should know what he meant and didn't want to reveal my ignorance.) I wonder what he had in mind. What would Advent be without looking forward to the beautiful birth of that precious baby? (I wonder how “beautiful” Mary thought it was riding a donkey in her full-term pregnancy or giving birth in a cold, dirty stable...) What would a Christmas pageant be like with just that eccentric old John the Baptist clothed with camel's hair and leather belt around his waist (and I'm guessing it wasn't a particularly fashionable leather belt—as one commentator noted, John's outfit that was several centuries out of fashion<sup>1</sup>). What would a Christmas pageant be like with just that eccentric old John the Baptist clothed with camel's hair and leather belt around his waist, eating wild honey and locusts and calling out “Repent! Repent!” Maybe doing some baptisms. Maybe he would say, “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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” And that would be about it. (Unfortunately, Mark's John the Baptist doesn't have quite the detail of Luke and Matthew who report an even more colorful John calling the crowds flocking to hear him a “brood of vipers.”)

There's not much Christmas-y about an all Markan Christmas. And an all Markan Advent might not lead us exactly where we want to go. But then, as followers of Jesus seeking Christ's way, as we know that Jesus doesn't always lead us where we want to go, either. And though John the Baptist is a far cry from “have a holly, jolly Christmas,” we hear about him every Advent. In the Biblical narrative John the Baptist stands with one foot in the Old Testament—hearkening

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<sup>1</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 47.

back to the prophets, quoting both Malachi and Isaiah while behaving and dressing like Elijah—and one foot in the New Testament—foretelling the coming of the Messiah.

Every year we hear John out in the wilderness proclaiming, “prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Of course, that’s not so surprising. We know that Advent is a time for preparation for the coming of Christ, both in celebration and remembrance of his incarnation in the form a baby in a particular time and place and in anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ at some unknown time in the (probably) far off future. But John is also proclaiming repentance. What does repentance have to do with Christmas?

In a recent issue of *Christian Century*<sup>2</sup> Bill Goettler, the assistant dean of ministerial studies at Yale Divinity School and co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church of New Haven writes about an ongoing relationship with a homeless man named Danny:

*Danny appeared on our porch on a cold December afternoon a couple of years ago, hat in hand. He was honest, at least. He’d been sleeping here and there since getting back into town, he said, mostly on the porch of the Red Cross headquarters across from the church. The people there didn’t seem to mind, and he always cleared out before anyone arrived for work in the morning. He didn’t want anyone to be frightened.*

*He needed some food, maybe some money for the bus. We’d just hung the Moravian Christmas star on our front porch and placed Advent candles in our window. It was a pretty tough moment to refuse someone aid, so against my better judgment I dug into my wallet and found a few dollars. As he was leaving, Danny turned and looked me in the eye.*

*“Is this the way it’s supposed to be?” he asked.*

*He was off before I could reply or even register what he’d said.”*

Goettler relates that over the years he’s had ongoing interactions with Danny, most of which ended with what he calls Danny’s one-line sermon, “*Is this the way it’s supposed to be?*” He goes on to admit that he doesn’t like Danny. And he doesn’t “like the kind of relationship [they] have, built as it is on [Danny’s] need and [Bill’s] reluctant response.” He doesn’t like Danny popping

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Goettler, “Living By The Word,” *Christian Century*, November 29, 2011, Vol. 128, No. 24.

up unexpectedly and he especially doesn't like that one-line sermon that haunts him, particularly at this time of year, "Is this the way it's supposed to be?"

But he sees Danny as a kind of John the Baptist. Like John, making people a little uncomfortable. Like John, most people think him a bit "off." Goettler notes that as we approach Christmas we want to hear the stories of that sweet young family on a long journey. We want to hear about the child soon to be born in a stable built for animals who so endearingly share their space and adore the baby. But John tells us, "You are not ready for that story. Remember Isaiah. Every valley will be lifted up. There will be equity for the meek, justice for the poor. *Then* the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."

Goettler confesses, "I want the good news of Christmas without the challenge. I want the birth narrative without the prophet. I want redemption without judgment." And I suspect most of us could make the same confession. I know I can. I want pretty lights and Christmas trees, hot chocolate and Christmas carols and I'd rather have the sweet little baby promising our salvation without admitting or acknowledging the horrendous failures in the world that make that salvation necessary. And I certainly don't want to think about the innumerable failures in myself that make that salvation necessary. Not now. Not when I'm trying to have a nice Christmas. Perhaps I'll think about all that later. Lent, perhaps, would be a better time to think about all that unpleasant stuff.

*"Is this the way it's supposed to be?"* I think we all know the answer.

How do we prepare for the coming of the Christ? By working to turn the question, "Is this the way it's supposed to be?" into a statement: This is the way it's supposed to be. Of course, we can't usher in the Reign of Christ by our own efforts, we leave that to God. But what we can do, what we're called to do, is orient ourselves in the right direction. What we can do is put the car in reverse, pull out of that parking spot and proceed toward the Reign of Christ, preparing ourselves, preparing the world for the day when all will proclaim, "*This is the way it's supposed to be.*"