

Year B Advent 2 2023 Your Imaginary Pony Mark 1 vv1 to 8

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” No introduction to Jesus’ family, no breaking of the big news of an impending pregnancy to a young peasant girl, no birth in Bethlehem, no angels, no shepherds, nothing. Nothing but the bombshell: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Mark picks up the story of our salvation where the prophets had left off about 500 years earlier as if there had been no break at all. This is the continuing saga of God’s saving activity, Mark insists. God has been working on this all along. The ancient steadfast loving-kindness of God is revealed in the radical newness of God in the flesh, choosing to dwell among us – Jesus the Christ.

Expecting to meet up with Jesus – this is the good news of Jesus Christ, after all – we, instead, meet up with John the Baptist. But this is part of the plan, Mark tells us. The very last words of the very last prophetic messenger of God 500 years earlier are: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a ban of utter destruction” (Malachi 4:5-6). Before God comes among us, Elijah will appear once more and, so, Mark gives us Elijah. Elijah, described in 2 Kings as “a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist” (2 Kings 1:8) is now John, “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist”. Mark also goes back a little earlier in time to further strengthen his point of the continuation of the ongoing saga of our redemption by telling us that he is quoting from the prophet Isaiah. A messenger will come, Isaiah had said, a messenger will prepare God’s way, a messenger, in the wilderness, who will cry out, “Prepare the way of

the Lord, make his paths straight.” And there is John, crying out for people to come and be baptized – an outward sign of their repentance, their turning once more to God’s ways to be forgiven for having turned from God in the first place.

And the people were excited. People from the *whole* Judean countryside and *all* the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, to be baptized in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Hearing Mark’s Gospel is like turning on the t.v and plunging into the middle of a loud and chaotic action scene: a voice is crying out an urgent message, people are yelling and calling out to one another, some are singing, some are crying, people are running, practically running this crazy looking man over in their haste and crush of the crowd around him. You don’t know exactly what is going on but something sure is happening. These people are excited. These people are in a hurry. Why is everyone so attracted to John the Baptist? What message is he proclaiming so urgently and passionately?

John had set off the buzzer of their alarm clock on their bedside table. He had awakened in them the hope that, for most, had lain dormant, sleeping and forgotten for a long time. But now, the news was out: their rescuer was coming. God was making good on his promises – God was going to make his home among them and all of the brokenness would be healed. Elijah was back. The words of Isaiah were ringing out across the wilderness. The Jordan River was once again the gateway into the promised land, their haven from the wilderness. The fullness of God’s kingdom was arriving.

This is fantastic news that the people desperately needed to hear. Life is not all sunshine and lollipops. The rich are getting richer. The poor are struggling to make ends meet. Some are out on the streets begging for help from their neighbours.

People are getting sick and dying. The peace they're experiencing isn't really peace at all – only the absence of war...for the time being. The people in power don't care. They're satisfied with the status quo.

Into the darkness and despair comes a ray of light: a messenger proclaiming that God is here, God is victorious, God reigns! This messenger – this “one who brings the good news” – is the *euangelizō*, the evangelizer. In those days, the “one who brings good news” often meant the messenger soldier sent from the battlefield to bring good news of a successful battle. This proclamation of good news we hear today isn't the sweetness of a Hallmark card. This good news is coming from a place of struggle, amid an ongoing battle. Jesus himself proclaimed the good news: “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near” from a place of struggle. Temptations by Satan in the wilderness, exorcisms, demon-thwarting miracles, overcoming violent storms, the sun-darkened crucifixion...it is a struggle from beginning to end.

Our lives are a struggle. There are many battles being fought in us, around us, in the world. The rich are still getting richer. The people in power still don't seem to care very much about what happens to “the little guy”. Into the darkness and despair comes a ray of light: John's message to prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. God is coming. Ready or not, God is coming. Let John's voice be your wake-up call. Let his message set off the alarm on your bedside table and awaken your hope that perhaps is sleeping, hope that perhaps you had forgotten was there, or didn't even know about.

Like the people in the story, rushing out to hear John, to turn their lives back to God and be baptized, we too are waiting for the coming of God, for the time when

God's kingdom will be complete and all brokenness will be healed. But, we actually have something that they didn't have. We already have the victory.

A guard opens the cell of a captured soldier and, roughly yanking the prisoner to his feet, brings him down the dimly lit corridor to the interrogation room for "questioning". What seems like hours go by – the prisoner's face is bloody and bruised, his eyes nearly swollen shut but, through the large window into the guard's staff room next door, an eerie flickering light catches his eye. Blinking he tries to focus and, through the haze of blood and sweat he sees a t.v on in the other room. On the screen is a parade. It is a victory parade – ticker tape flying through the air and smiling faces cheering the passing soldiers with their fists raised in triumph. The war is over. We've won, the prisoner realizes.

Despite the skirmishes still going on around us, the war has been won. God's kingdom on earth is not yet complete but God's kingdom in heaven is, even now, raising the roof with their victory celebration. God has defeated the powers of darkness and death. We have already reached the end of Mark's Gospel. "Don't be alarmed," the angel says to the women arriving at the tomb on Easter morning. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here" (16:6). The tomb is empty. Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee.

Like the excitedly hopeful crowds in the story, we are waiting but we are closer than they to the time of fulness of God's kingdom. "I have baptized you in water," John tells them, "but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." That is our reality. They were eagerly awaiting the perfection of the kingdom found in Jesus Christ but we have it. Through the mystery of baptism, we are buried with Christ, raised

to new life in Christ, and carry Christ within us – God the Holy Spirit dwells within us, bearing the fullness of God’s kingdom just as Christ did.

It used to be that every Monday in the New York Times, there was a column by Joe Rogers called “Metropolitan Diary,” which offers a series of anecdotes from the lives of New Yorkers. One contained the true story of an incident she had in Central Park. As she was entering the park, she saw a couple coming toward her with their young daughter. The girl was tired and clearly wanted to be carried. When the young family of three got close enough to the woman, the woman leaned in to the girl and said softly, “I bet what you need is an imaginary pony.” The little girl’s eyes brightened and suddenly she stood up straight and galloped away from them. “What is your pony’s name?” the woman shouted after her. “Sally!” the little girl called back over her shoulder. “Are you a child psychologist?” the father asked the woman. She smiled and said, “No, but when our children were small, we always took some imaginary ponies along for the walk back home.” (p.8-9 of *Lift Up Your Hearts Homilies and Reflections for the ‘B’ Cycle*)

We all get tired and worn out and feel that we just can’t take another step. We all need an imaginary pony sometimes. As we are relentlessly pushed into the bubbly happy Christmas spirit, what we need is some Advent imagination. An Advent imagination is rooted in a heart open to the unexpected and radical newness of a God daring to dwell among his people, daring to gift himself to them in the presence of the Holy Spirit. To get through life, we often need some help to keep us moving along. We have something much more substantial than an imaginary pony and infinitely more appealing. We have the strength and power of the Word of God offering to us a vision that pulls us onto our feet and into God’s future. The

Word of God sets before us a God as tender as a shepherd who feeds his flock and lifts them to his bosom; a God as patient as one for whom a thousand years are like one day and who waits as long as is divinely possible for us to change; a God as burning with love as the fire of the Spirit that makes all things new, especially our battered, broken down, beaten-up hearts (p.11 of *Lift Up Your Hearts*).

And that fire of the Spirit dwells in us. Let John's urgent and exuberant message be proclaimed amid our wilderness. Let it wake up the hope in the depths of our being. Let it stir up the knowledge that, even as we fight the skirmishes, the war has been won and we carry the victory within us. Embrace the strength and power of the sure and certain hope. Let us allow it to mend our brokenness and spread its healing into the world, hastening the day when the fulness of the kingdom will arrive. Let it infuse new life in your steps as we turn to God's ways and draw others to us to share this path. Together we can, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Ready or not, God is coming: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.