

Adult Sunday School

The Second Sunday of Advent 2020

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" ', John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Mark 1:1-8, NRSV

1. Background, Part 1: This scripture is the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, which is thought to be the earliest Gospel among those included in the New Testament. This is where it all begins, even though Matthew's Gospel is canonically first. Also, Paul's letters are thought to be written earlier than any of the Gospels, but I digress. In Mark's opening statement, he draws heavily from the book of Prophet Isaiah, quoting part of Isaiah chapter 40. Interestingly, the New Testament Greek does not contain punctuation, so the marks included in the English translation were added by the translation team. This means that the opening statement might actually be intended to read: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God as it is written in the prophet Isaiah...". If this indeed is a valid alternate translation, it may mean that Mark understood God's Good News of the Christ to have begun 500+ years before the person of Jesus arrived on the scene.
2. Background, Part 2: The Isaiah text that Matthew quotes is thought to be derived from the specific period of history when the Israelites were just being freed from Babylonian exile and captivity, but before they returned to their homeland, the 'Promised Land', where they had previously been living (and where a remnant had remained during the exile). Isaiah proclaimed that God was making a "highway" from Babylonia back to the Promised Land, like a Second Exodus, cutting through the forests and fields and mountains and valleys, with a direct route. God's deliverance was coming! It is not surprising that the Gospel writers would have understood Jesus' life and ministry to be a similar moment of God's imminent deliverance.
3. Background, Part 3: The Second Sunday of Advent moves us closer to the coming of Jesus as observed in the lectionary cycle and liturgical calendar. Mark's Gospel doesn't contain any of the "infancy narratives", as they are called, which are the most familiar Christmas stories we hear every year. It's thought that the infancy narratives were added later by Luke and Matthew, in an attempt to theologize the life of Jesus and give some indication of his divine authority.
4. In difficult seasons of life, we often find ourselves waiting for God to act. In what ways have you had to wait for God to act in your life?
5. What do you think it means that John says "[The one who is more powerful than I] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"?