

December 6, 2020, the Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)  
**Well, What Did You Expect?**

**Mark 1:1-8**

<sup>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.”

In case you haven’t noticed, Christmas is coming. Oh, the anticipation is horrendous; especially since it has been building from before Halloween this year. Leiber and Stoller penned a song for Peggy Lee ages ago with the chorus, “Is that all there is?” We are on the dangerous edge of just such a depressing thought. Instead of following the ancient traditions, we have front loaded Christmas and pushed it all into one day, with a spillover to the night before. In the depth of dark cold northern European winters, people lit big logs and celebrated around their hearths for twelve days starting, not ending, on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Advent was a time to deprive themselves and save up for the happy days remembering the early life of Jesus from birth to bris to when the Wise Men arrived. They told stories of those ancient days and of saints who came after, like good king what’s his name. You know, the one who looked out on the Feast of Steven, boxing day, or December 26<sup>th</sup>. Now, Dickens admonished us through his pal Ebenezer to keep Christmas all year round. I suppose the folks at Macy’s would love that, but their idea of Christmas may not coincide with what Dickens had in mind.

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Looking at the towering statistics of hospitalizations and deaths from the current epidemic, we are rightly worried about Christmas this year. Is the holiday like an onion that when stripped of all its layers is just a void? We have to peel a great deal away because of medical necessity, and that creates anxiety around how to celebrate the holiday. This is in addition to the anxiety of how we get the groceries, and am I feeling feverish? We could avoid this worry by following our predecessors in the Reform faith. They outlawed the celebration of Christmas. When the pilgrims landed there were no boxes of tinsel, artificial trees, colored lights, and candy canes. A New England Christmas wasn't a thing until after those wicked Victorians copied Prince Albert's German pagan pageantry. Much as I appreciate the work you all have done to make the church welcoming to the baby Jesus, it would not sit well with the first occupants of this sanctuary.

Yet, they were not a joyless crew. In times much tougher than ours they found ways to bring light and warmth to one another. Families round the hearth and food shared with passing travelers have always been essential to being a Christian. The holidays, how and whether they were celebrated, came in and out of fashion. We have to invent ways to welcome Jesus in this odd year, but thank God, it is an odd year not likely soon to be repeated.

I have long taken comfort from the words of the prophet Habakkuk. That's spelled with an H and an A and a B and an A and a K and a K and a U and a K:

**Habakkuk 3:17**

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of

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my salvation. <sup>19</sup> God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

We have looked for Jesus return from the first faithful followers to today. I think sometimes that massive expectation blinds us to Christ who is already with us. So, we have memories of Christmas past and hopes for Christmas to come that will join us round the tree this year and are reduced to the simplest elements of the season, God with us and with all those who are parted and departed. Yet I rejoice in the God of my salvation.

**CONCLUDING PRAYER:** Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.