

The past few weeks you've heard sermons about waiting, and watching, about keeping alert and about being patient through these unprecedented times. The news has been a wall of warnings and restrictions peppered with bright spots of possible vaccines and promises of an end in sight. The radio and television and even the mail are all constant streams of advertisements, sales, and opportunities to fill the hole left by separation and cancelled travel. As our bishop shared with our diocese a few weeks ago, we are entirely fed up with living in unprecedented times.

The fear we feel for our health and safety is not unprecedented, humanity has lived through plague and pestilence and war before. The insecurity we feel about our economic status and the welfare of businesses and systems is not unprecedented, this country has seen depression and recession and financial crises before. The frustration we feel about being unable to gather for worship and fellowship is not unprecedented, in the face of threats to health and safety churches have closed their doors and priests have said mass in empty chapels on behalf of their people before. The loneliness and isolation we feel in our separation from friends and loved ones is not unprecedented, our ancestors endured passage through wilderness and desert and immigration to strange lands with unfamiliar languages, some of them against their will. All over the world, every day, pandemic or not, people endure separation, and violence, and fear, and pain. The particular circumstances of our present moment may feel unique. But in looking to

our history, and the endurance of those who came before us, we find that our experience is not without precedent.

Our ancestor in the faith, John, knew this all too well. John the Baptist, John Son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, harbored no illusion that his was a unique message. John was a faithful student of the prophets, of Isaiah and Jonah and Malachi and Hosea and Elijah. The message that John preached was already old when he proclaimed it by the banks of the Jordan. Mark thus introduces him with the words of Isaiah and the words of Malachi and the message of so many prophets throughout history; Prepare the way of the Lord. In the desert, make straight the path. Something big is coming, and it's up to us to make ready for the day that something arrives.

The Gospel of Mark begins with a breathless urgency, the voice of a messenger who has rushed across a great distance to ensure that the important news is heard far and wide. Unlike the Gospel of Luke, which begins with John the Baptist's birth, or the Gospel of Matthew, which begins with the birth of Jesus, or even the Gospel of John, which begins with the birth of Time and all creation, Mark cuts right to the chase. The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God. And off we go, immediately diving into the baptizing ministry of John, a story begun in the midst of rebirth and renewal and remembrance of prophecies of old.

Like Mark the urgent bearer of the Gospel, John comes proclaiming a new kind of baptism, not totally unfamiliar but not entirely traditional either. John implores all within earshot to please, immediately, repent and return to the work God has given you. Be washed of your sins and take on the work of Justice, Mercy and Love, there is no time to waste. Like prophets before him, John through his words and his actions and even through his very appearance compels the people of God to get their act together, for the world is about to change. For the first time since time began, something truly unprecedented is about to happen.

Prophets and preachers of history have proclaimed a message of salvation for believers, salvation for leaders and their followers, salvation for particular nations and ethnic groups and armies and kings. The prophets of God have proclaimed a future day of salvation on which all nations and peoples will be reconciled to God and one another, and preachers and teachers of the faith have held up for God's people reminders of the promise to Abraham and to Sarah. John falls in line with this tradition of faithful prophecy, calling the people to look toward the imminent day of salvation. John steps into the sightline of the faithful ones of God throughout time and invites us to join him there, at the vantage point where all eyes are focused on the coming of Immanuel, and all hands are stretched wide in the direction of God's saving presence.

Even as people flocked from all over the country to see him preach and to be baptized by him, even as people left their families and their livelihoods to become his disciples and imitate his teachings, John remains entirely uninterested in his own originality. “Someone better is coming” he reminds anyone who will listen. “Someone who will change you forever, someone who will fulfill all the Law and the Prophets, someone that I am not even worthy to serve is coming.” All John desires is to make the people ready, so that when the savior comes, they will know Him when they see him and their hearts will be open to his word. John stands with the prophets and believers of God, and points ahead with them toward the Advent of God’s own Son. Even now, thousands of years later, we meet John in the same season of waiting, and he lifts up the only unprecedented event in all of human history. Soon, God will be born incarnate, born vulnerable and weak and utterly human. Our precedents, the ones who came before, the mothers and fathers of our precious faith, lived their entire lives in anticipation and celebration of this moment around which all of history turns. They call us to turn our faces now, so that any who meet us will look where we are pointing and see their own redeemer. Prophesy with your words and with your actions and with your very selves. Orient yourself toward the Light that is coming and is already here. Prepare the way of the Lord, even while we’re in the wilderness. We’re in good company.