

“Those Who Dream Prepare the Way”  
Mark 1:1-8

When we think of the Christian story, we often begin with the birth of Jesus. The beautiful and powerful stories told of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke have fueled our imagination for centuries with many nativity scenes. But today, we look at the beginning of the story of Jesus according to the Gospel of Mark which begins in a different place. We are not told about the birth of Jesus. Instead, we are told about the ministry of the one who prepared the way for Jesus, his cousin John the Baptizer. It seems like an odd starting point when the main character is Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark tends to surprise and disorient its readers in order for them to pay attention to the amazing news of the story of Christ. Both the beginning and ending (shorter ending Mark 16:8) of the Gospel leave us with little certainty and with a lot of wondering to do. In the verses we just read we have a beginning that does not have a genealogy, a birth story, shepherds, magi, or great theological proclamations about Jesus. Not only that but the Gospel of Mark also begins in the Judean wilderness with the ministry of John the Baptist who was a wild prophet living intentionally on the edge of society. This was not the place where the people were looking for God's action to take place. God acted in the wilderness in the time of Moses and the experience of Exodus. But after that, religious action and devotion seemed to have moved closer to the cities. The center for people's worship and experiences of God was not in the wilderness. It was instead in the temple in Jerusalem. The work of John the Baptist in the wilderness was an intentional departure from the expectations and limits of his society. What the author of Mark was trying to convey to his readers was that the unexpected was taking place; God was coming into their midst in such an unexpected way outside the margins of society and power.

That is how radical change comes! When we have people who are willing to risk their own comfort in order to disrupt the injustices of the day. Jesus' ministry needed the ministry of John. John was the one who trained him and who got people prepared to think outside the box of the temple in Jerusalem. John was the one who called people to remember God's dream for his people of justice, peace, and compassion. The Roman Empire was offering peace through domination and violence. God's dream was for peace that would come through justice and compassion where people would forgive debts, share resources, and care for the most vulnerable.

Today we are called to be the ones who are like John the Baptizer to prepare the way for God's dream of peace, even if we are not the ones who get to see the results. In history, there are those who are often forgotten because they were preparers of the way but someone else was the one who got to reap the harvest of what they planted.

One example is that of Rosa Parks. Everyone knows her name and what she did by refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a White man and thus was in defiance and violation of the unjust segregation laws of her day. But what we often forget are the women who prepared the way before her. One such story is that of Sarah Keys Evans. In 1952, while on a bus trip home, Private First Class Sarah Keys was told to move to the

back. Keys refused and was taken off to jail. She was fined and released in the morning. She fought in the courts for three years to overturn the unjust laws of segregation. Here is a video of her story: <https://youtu.be/RAQOTvpUJsQ>.

Another forerunner to Rosa Parks was Claudette Colvin (picture). When she was 15 years old, she refused to move to the back of the bus. This was 9 months before Rosa Parks. I think of Sarah Keys Evans and Claudette Colvin as preparers of the way, just like John the Baptizer prepared the way for Jesus. People who prepare the way, may not have celebrity status, but their work is so essential for God's dream of peace in the world. The people who prepare the way come in all kinds and shapes but always have the passion for God's peace which is about wholeness.

John the Baptizer was an odd and imposing figure who lived in the wild and relied on what the land gave off such as honey and locusts. His role was to wake people up to God's dream so that they may be ready for the coming of Christ. He also prepared Jesus for his ministry. In fact, he was the one who ended up baptizing Jesus. John knew that in order for people to really live into God's peace and wholeness, they had to leave behind the ways of exploitation and dominance. He knew that peace was not some idyllic lack of conflict. God's vision for peace was robust because it included wholeness for all.

We are invited to consider our calling as ones who prepare the way for God's action and dreams for peace to unfold in the world. We are called to prepare the way of the Lord by working for a robust peace that brings wholeness and wellbeing for all. God's dream for peace challenges us to step out of our comfort zones to engage the realities of suffering in our world with a commitment to the common good.

What is a practical step to prepare for the peace of Christ to come into our world? Last week, there was an article by Kelly Corrigan called, "This Thanksgiving, Pass on the Forgiveness." Corrigan emphasizes the importance of forgiveness for the sake of our common good, not to excuse bad behavior or to accept mistreatment from others. Instead, the idea is to stand firmly in goodness so that we are able to respond in love and work with others. Here is an excerpt from Corrigan's piece, "The why of forgiveness is more obvious than the how. It takes a lot to break through the wall of emotions (disgust, anger, hurt) that blocks us from forgiveness, especially when the offense is cruel or damaging. How do we even begin?"

I find it helps to invoke memories of my own crimes and misdemeanors. I have been late, lazy, unduly lucky. I have been the young solipsist, the cocky college kid, the judgy midlife Karen. I have drunk too much drink, spoken too sharply, been too harsh in my evaluations. Sometimes I don't help out as much as I should. I have mistaken identity for character. I am only partly informed, and I am overly influenced by the media outlets I choose to explain the world to me.

Once my recall has been revived, I try to stay in the memory as long as I can bear. The more detail I can conjure, the more completely my sense of outrage dissipates. The Catholics of my childhood might call this process confession-adjacent. I think of it as

humility - and there's research showing a link between facing our own flaws and finding our way to forgive others."

This is one of the many ways, we can make God's dream of peace come true. I hope that this week, you will spend time thinking of how God is calling you to prepare the way.

We will end with a song that expands on the concept of peace of justice of an older hymn. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the eve of the Civil War in our country, abolitionist Julia Ward Howe wrote a hymn that became a call to arms for the Union cause of freedom: The Battle Hymn of the Republic. In 2019, artist Audrey Assad picked up the theme of freedom and peace to expand it into today's world without the use of violence. It is a call and a prayer to see our deep connectedness to one another. Melzie and Brian will be sharing this new piece with us: <https://youtu.be/hCZk20ayFwI>

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord  
You are speaking truth to power, you are laying down our swords  
Replanting every vineyard 'til a brand new wine is poured  
Your peace will make us one

I've seen you in our home fires burning with a quiet light  
You are mothering and feeding in the wee hours of the night  
Your gentle love is patient, you will never fade or tire  
Your peace will make us one

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Your peace will make us one

In the beauty of the lilies you were born across the sea  
With a glory in your bosom that is still transfiguring  
Dismantling our empires 'til each one of us is free  
Your peace will make us one

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Your peace will make us one

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
Your peace will make us one. Amen.