

READING FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE (Isaiah 40:1-11)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,* lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' ¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

READING FROM THE GOSPEL (Mark 1: 1-18)

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."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

SERMON

"Prepare Him Room"

[The first time I preached on the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson I told you that conservative theologian Karl Barth said that any preacher worth his salt "preaches with his Bible in one hand, and his newspaper in the other." According to Time magazine in 1963, this is the more accurate quote: "[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.'"]

Today, it would probably be more accurate or relevant to say to take your Bible and take your twitter account and read both. But interpret your twitter account from your Bible.

I have brave colleagues who have been interpreting their twitter account from their Bible for two weeks--preaching on racism in America, and feeling the repercussions of it. I have colleagues who have had parishioners get up from their pews during sermons and slam the doors to the church on their way out. I have colleagues who have gotten angry emails and phone calls and threats. Interpreting the twitterverse/newspaper/Facebook account with the Bible; is dangerous for preachers who want to keep their jobs, and I suppose it always has been.

So I just want to say something important about our free church tradition, for those of us who are new to us. In our Congregationalist tradition we have a great freedom. We ministers like to say “free pulpit”, “free pew”. AND, we have also covenanted to stay in relationship with each other in the spirit of Jesus—in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty...in all things charity. Please disagree with me. Stay in conversation. Because even though I have this free pulpit, God knows I have more questions than answers. But please don't slam the door, to your hearts or to the church. Let's stay in conversation about the Truth as we understand it, and learn from one another. We are more apt to get closer to Truth, and to God together than we can on our own.]

So please won't you pray with me.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts together be acceptable unto you o God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Let's start with our Gospel text this morning. This is a text typically read during Advent--a season in which we wait for the birth of Jesus; when the light of God enters the world in the form of a tiny baby lying in a manger; during the darkest time of the year. Our text comes from the opening of the book of Mark, which scholars think is the oldest of the gospels. So the first line of the first gospel is: “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, and recalls the text from Isaiah that we also read this morning:

“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.’”

The Good News of Jesus Christ begins in a not-so-good place. It starts in the midst of Roman occupation. It begins, even before that, in the midst of the exile of the Israelites in the wilderness, where they are told not to fear, that a shepherd will lead them; a voice crying out in the wilderness; a messenger.

Thanks be to God for the messenger, because I sure don't know how to prepare the way of the Lord right now, to make his paths straight. I don't know how, as the carol says, to “prepare him room.” Especially since, as Isaiah reminds us, we are called to cry out in the wilderness despite the

fact that we humans are like grass who will fade and blow away. It seems futile, this crying out to people who will soon fade away.

And despite the fact that our passage from Mark reminds us that the kingdom of God is near, so we better get ready; it doesn't seem very near to us sometimes. It is hard to imagine a time when the hills will be made low and the rough parts plain. But the kingdom of God is near, precisely when it doesn't seem like it. The Good News breaks in--In the midst of despair and darkness and civil unrest and oppression and occupation and exile and death and rioting and righteous anger and destruction of property. The Lord has come! Let earth receive her king.

Let every heart prepare him room.

Gosh, it seems like there are so many hearts that are unprepared for Jesus right now; like there is no room for him. I know this because I spend too much time on Facebook.

I preached a sermon here this August following the death of Mike Brown, referring to him as a child of God; one whose life mattered to God. And a woman on the internet read my sermon a few weeks ago after the decision of the grand jury not to indict Darren Wilson was made, and said something to the effect of "Stop referring to that man as a child. He was a THUG, legally an adult, and able to make adult decisions. He chose his response to getting arrested. He paid the consequences."

You all know by now the ambiguity of that case in Ferguson, Missouri. I'll be frank: it wasn't as clear cut, in the end, as activists wanted it to be. It wasn't as clear-cut, in the end, as I wanted it to be. I know it would be easier if we had a world in which there were good guys and bad guys; thugs and pigs vs. nice people, but God didn't make a world like that. And isn't that a good thing, that there is no such thing as "right" people and "wrong" people; good people, bad people? Just a human family in which our sins and our goodness are all intertwined and wrapped up in each other's? It makes things complicated, yes. And human.

But Mike Brown was not a child, this woman said, he was a thug. I have seen a picture that is circulating around the internet that was purportedly of Mike Brown—a picture of him with a gun in his hand and a wad of money in his mouth, a bottle of Hawaiian punch in the foreground. Mike Brown was not a child, she said, he was a thug. See? Here's a picture.

I think our Gospel paints a different picture. I think our Gospel says that we are all children of God, gun or no gun. That all of our lives matter. That

Mike Brown mattered to God. That Eric Garner and Tamir Rice and Alonzo Rice and Steven Eugene Washington and Victor Steen and Kimani Gray and Kendree McDade and Timothy Russell and Emir Jefferson and Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond and Timothy Stansbury and Sean Bell and Orlando Barlow and Aaron Campbell and Wendell Allen and all of the other unarmed black men and boys killed by police in the past few years alone—their lives matter to God.

I have seen sentiments, decrying 'racist' police officers on the internet by my liberal friends, wanting to make all of the police force in all of America the bad guy. Darren Wilson was not a victim, they say, he was a racist pig. And I have seen pictures of Darren Wilson posted on social media by angry liberal friends—pictures of him looking rather frightening and with a small pink mark on his face from the altercation with Mike Brown—staring into the camera angrily/looking like a scary modern day version of a white supremacist. He is not a child of God, this picture suggests. See? Here's a picture.

I think our Gospel paints a different picture. I think our Gospel says that we are all children of God, gun or no gun. That our policemen, who sign up to serve and protect; who risk their lives every day and have fears and families like the rest of us—that their lives matter to God.

Just yesterday, someone posted a picture of a beautiful, chubby black baby boy in a diaper lying face down on the ground with a chalk outline surrounding his body. And the caption read "When does he stop being someone's baby?" I choked with tears thinking about my own moon-faced little boy.

Our gospel paints this picture: Jesus on his birthday, born of lowly status, an immigrant to the town of Bethlehem, brown skin shining, so tender and mild. And I think of how quickly he went from the manger tableau of mother and child, radiant beams from his holy face—to a threat to the authorities, just 33 years later.

My colleague Bob Janis-Dillon wrote:

"He was a THUG who intentionally tried to disrupt society, who had no respect for other people's property and caused havoc to honest businessmen, whose followers were hoodlums who attacked police with a deadly weapon, who disobeyed the authorities and got what was coming to him. Even so, I'm still celebrating Jesus Christ's birth this Christmas."

"When did Jesus stop being someone's baby?"

The answer is, he never did. We never do. And maybe preparing baby Jesus room in our hearts means seeing one another as mamas and papas see their babies: precious, beloved, worthy of our care.

Maybe preparing room in our hearts for the birth of Jesus means preparing room in our hearts to see one another as the Christ child. Not as thug, but the Christ child. Not as racist, but the Christ child. Not as pig, but the Christ child. Not as looter, but the Christ child. Not as an animal or a beast, but as the Christ child. Not as oppressor, but as the Christ child.

So I'm thinking about Jesus; making room for him, and how hard that is, and weird, and scary, and impossible for we who are angry, or disbelieving, and we who are complacent and tired; and we who want to keep our jobs. And I'm thinking how futile it all is; we who are yelling in the wilderness because we are grass in the wind anyway.

And I'm thinking about how we need to proclaim this good news in the wilderness NOW, despite apathy and rage and complacency and futility. Especially now, when our unarmed black brothers are dying in violent ways and at alarming rates, and NOW, when we live so separately from one another; so separately that we are no longer people, no longer mother's children--but beasts and pigs; thugs and oppressors.

And I'm thinking we have to proclaim this good news in the wilderness now more than ever because I'm thinking about my New Testament class in seminary taught by biblical scholar Dr. Jennifer Knust. We read this book about the historical Jesus by Paula Fredricksen called "Jesus of Nazareth." What I remember most from that class was the meaning of crucifixion in the Roman empire--crucifixion was a warning to people. They hung you on a cross so you could be a warning to others like you--a warning to those in your class; in your station. Usually only slaves and bandits were crucified.

My professor Jenny Knust called crucifixion "a public service message" to other oppressed peoples. It was a body hanging on a cross that basically said: "Don't do this, or you'll be next." And I keep thinking about that in relationship to the modern day crucifixion of our black men on the streets of our cities. While white people like me sit in our churches meekly and mildly singing Silent Night, hoping to keep our jobs, forgetting that Tamir and Mike and Eric and Trayvon were also sons of God, love's pure light. Our black boys are getting public service messages from the empire.

And it is not our police force we are getting this message from, but the empire of systemic racism...the original sin we all inherited that keeps us separated from each other, unable to see one another as kin; as children of God. And this is the sin we must cry out about in the wilderness until it is dismantled and destroyed.

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ starts in reaction to empire; a cry in the wilderness: "MAKE STRAIGHT THE PATH!" on the streets of Jerusalem during Roman occupation: "PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD!"; on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri: "CRY OUT!"; on the streets of New York City where Eric Garner said his last words over and over and over again as a New York City policeman choked him to death: "I can't breathe." I can't breathe: the words Jesus might have uttered as he lost his breath on the cross; as he became a public service message meant for others like him.

The truth is that Jesus just comes on his own every Advent and wherever there is oppression and injustice, whether we are prepared for him or not. Whether we've made room for him in our hearts or not. Whether his path is made straight, or not. Whether we have come to see each other as we see the Christ child, or not. The way of the Lord is prepared in the midst of empire and execution. This is precisely when Jesus breaks back into the world--as a warning and a threat. Come, o long, expected Jesus.

Prepare him room.