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The Beginning of the Good News
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B
Mark 1:1-8
December 10, 2017

It's been a week, hasn't it? Wildfires in California, with winds so strong that Southern California has pushed past yellow, orange and red alerts all the way up to purple, for the first time in history. More powerful men losing their jobs due to accusations of sexual harassment or abuse. The number of homeless people increasing for the first time in seven years. And political news continues to be interesting.

Also this week, the second season of "The Crown" became available for viewing on Netflix. You know a show is good when you already know everything that's going to happen, and you still find yourself absolutely mesmerized. For those of you unfamiliar with the show, it follows Queen Elizabeth II from just before her wedding to Prince Philip all the way through her coronation and adjustment to her role as queen, and the first season ended just as Winston Churchill concludes his time as prime minister.

There is a memorable scene from the first episode in that first season, where King George takes his son-in-law shooting, and says to Philip, "You understand, the titles, the dukedom. . . they're not the job. *She* is the job. She is the *essence* of your duty. Loving her, protecting her—you'll miss your career—but there is no greater act of patriotism, of love."

One of the fascinating things about this series is the way it shows Philip's struggle to settle into his job as consort to the Queen. She will always be center stage, while he will always be a supporting character, always walking three steps behind her, always waiting for her, taking direction from her, kneeling to her . . . and, as he points out, he will be the only father in England

whose children don't have his name. It can't have been an easy adjustment, especially in an era like the 1950's.

John the Baptist also has an interesting job. When you stop and think about it, he is really quite a character. He must really know how to preach, because there he is, in the wilderness, not healing anybody, not performing any miracles, yet thousands of people go to the wilderness—go to him!—to hear what he has to say. John gets attention, and plenty of it. John must have been something, because later on in the Gospel, we hear that even King Herod, a person John openly challenged and criticized, liked listening to him.

Yet John never forgets who the main character is. John knows that he himself is only the warm up act. He says, “Before you get too excited about me, let me tell you . . . I am nothing compared to the one who is coming. He is the headliner. My act of baptizing by water can't even begin to compare with the baptism of the Holy Spirit that he will bring.”

John knows his place—not three steps behind, but a step ahead, to get everybody all washed clean and ready for the main event. And then, to gracefully step aside. As he says of Jesus in the Gospel of John, “He must increase; I must decrease.” Just imagine how the story might be different if John had insisted on staying center stage.

I've been reflecting on parenting a lot lately. There was a time when I was the center of the universe for my children. They ate when I fed them, and I was the one who held them and sang to them and bathed them and dressed them. I had the power to comfort them when they hurt. As they grew, this changed a bit, but I was still pretty important. One night, when I had been gone all day at work and stayed late for meetings, I finally came through the door, and Rachel, who was maybe 6 at the time, burst into song, so happy was she that mommy was home.

Today, my older daughter is newly married, and my younger one is a senior in high school who hopes to go to school far, far away next year. It's not that I'm not important anymore, but my role is not the same, nor should it be. If I insisted on staying center stage, my presence would interfere with their need to become their own persons. I'd be an obnoxious prima donna instead of a helpful, supporting character.

Later on, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus will describe John this way: "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." That's an interesting way to describe someone. John is the greater than anyone who has ever been born, according to Jesus. Yet at the same time, he is no more important than the tiniest bit player in the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist was a great man, but he was not the messiah. His job was not to save people, but to prepare the way for the one who could.

Nobody, not even John the Baptist, is given the job of savior except Jesus. Not even me. Not even you.

I don't know about you, but there are times when I really need to hear that. I am not the messiah. It is not my job to save the world, or to save my family, or even to save this church. I can't, because I'm not the one who saves. I am not the main character, not the star of this story, and neither are you. Thanks be to God!

It is not your job to win the game all by yourself while your team sits on the bench, or to singlehandedly reverse the decline of mainline religion in America, or to save your adult family members from some of the choices that they make. Thanks be to God!

We do have a job, though, just as John did. Prepare the way of the Lord.

I asked my daughter, Rachel, “What comes to your mind when I say the word, ‘prepare’?” She immediately replied, “Test.”

For me, I hear prepare and I think “performance.” I remember all the hours I would spend practicing the piano back in the day, playing the same trill hundreds of times in many different ways to get it nice and even, playing the song slower, and faster, and in dotted rhythms, with the metronome, without the metronome, a few measures at a time, and all the way through. I was motivated by fear. I didn’t want to mess up and be embarrassed in front of the judge or the audience or whatever the occasion was. The point was to practice so much that the piece would become ingrained in me, in my fingers and my brain, so that no matter how nervous I was, how cold my fingers were, how stiff the keyboard was, I could get through it, and maybe even play it somewhat musically in spite of myself.

For sports lovers, maybe you hear the word prepare and picture an athlete who practices the fundamentals over and over again, studies the plays, and trains hard, so that when the day of the big game comes, they are prepared to give it everything they’ve got.

What does John do to prepare the way of the Lord?

He preaches repentance.

We prepare for the Lord by repenting. In our prayer of confession that we pray each week, we repent. And this is one of those churchy words that we shy away from—it sounds so dramatic, and we don’t want to scare anybody away, but repentance is simply the act of acknowledging that Jesus is Lord, and we are not. And we admit that sometimes we forget this. Another way to think of repentance is to think of refocusing—sometimes life gets blurry and out of focus, and we need to take a moment and zoom in on Jesus.

The bottom line of any prayer of confession, whether we are a hardened criminal locked up for life, or a parent who got frustrated and snapped at her kid, whether we are a male executive who feels entitled to special attention from a female job applicant, or anyone at all who can't resist spreading a juicy piece of gossip—whoever we are, whatever we've done or not done that blocks God's path—the bottom line is our need for the one who saves. We aren't the Savior. We need one.

We always need one, so we keep preparing. Like an athlete in training, we confess our need for a savior, over, and over, and over again.

On this second Sunday of Advent, the word is peace. We light the candle of peace, and remember John the Baptist, his courage and faithfulness and his clarity of purpose—to prepare the way, but not to be the messiah. For all of us, especially those of us who take on too much, and worry too much, and expect so, so much of ourselves, may we receive the gift of peace this Advent season as we remember that our job, too, is not to save but only to prepare for the one who does.

The good news is, the Savior does come. The Savior has come, and will come again. His Spirit moves among us today, ready to enter our lives. May we be prepared to receive him!
Amen.