

**Ready or Not!**  
**Rev. Matt Landry**  
**December 3, 2017**

**Scripture:** Mark 1: 1-8

I turned off the Christmas music this week! I just couldn't take it any longer. It's been said many times, many ways Merry Christmas to you and it's only December 3<sup>rd</sup>. And it felt like spring earlier this week. And it's Advent! Today actually begins the season of Advent, the start of the liturgical calendar, and the countdown to Christmas; even though the world has moved onto to Christmas deals and lights, those in the church are still counting down the days to celebrating the coming of the Christ child. I'm not trying to be a bah-hum-bug Scrooge like my wife likes to remind me, I'm just embracing the church calendar.

To be totally honest, I'm actually really excited to celebrate Christmas at Meridian Street! As I stood freezing on the side of Illinois Street a few weeks ago with Pastor Steve and others for the Holiday Stroll at the shops on 56<sup>th</sup> and Illinois, I felt a real excitement for serving with all of you at Meridian Street. God is really up to something in our church, in our neighborhood, God is moving in all of us together! I'm excited about what God will do this Advent season, during our Christmas celebrations, and into the New Year.

During Advent, we prepare for, and anticipate, the coming of Christ. We remember the longing of the Jews for a Messiah and our own longing for, and need of, forgiveness, salvation and a new beginning. Even as we look back and celebrate the birth of Jesus in a humble stable in Bethlehem, we also look forward anticipating the second coming of Christ as the fulfillment of all that was promised by his first coming. I know what you're thinking. As I was reminded by someone in my previous congregation on the first Sunday of Advent, "Nothing says Merry Christmas like the second coming of Jesus." I realize that it's not a common theme with our Christmas celebrations, but it is a part of Advent, a word that means "coming" or "visit." Ready or not, Christmas is coming. Ready or not, Jesus will return, and for Christians that's not a bad thing, it's simply the fulfillment of the full reign of Christ on earth, as we proclaimed last week on Christ the King Sunday, it will be when God's Kingdom comes in its fullness of peace, hope, love, and joy.

It's December and I know you're all probably thinking about it and if not now, then probably in ten or so minutes, so let me just ask the question, "Are you ready for Christmas?" I mean, do you have the gifts wrapped, the parties scheduled, the music selected, and the menu picked out? I'm guessing not. This is a season full of details and expectations. There's much for us to do. Yet in the midst of all that this season holds, perhaps a voice will come from a surprising place proclaiming the way of the Lord.

A surprising figure is introduced to us in the first few lines of the Gospel of Mark. He's more of an Old Testament figure really. One who's clothing of a leather belt and a garment of camel's hair, which is an interesting look I must say, is similar to the clothing described in 2 Kings for the prophet Elijah. Who is this John? The interesting part of John is that he stretches and challenges

our image of God. John is identified as a wilderness man who points not to himself, but to the one who would come, "the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord."

John makes a major announcement, not just of the coming of the Messiah, but the coming of God's self to God's people. The passage announces God's intention to visit God's people. My seminary professor, Dr. Mark Allen Powell of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, wrote about what John came to proclaim. He wrote, "God does not say, 'Tell the people to get ready and when they have done so, I will come to them.' God says, 'Prepare the way! I am coming to my people (whether they are ready or not).'"

God comes to God's people, whether they are ready or not. Sounds like a mighty God to me. Nothing will stop this God. It reminds me of Isaiah 40, "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.'" John's words here. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." Another way to put it, "I will come to my people," God says, "Nothing will keep me from them. Mountains will be torn down, valleys will be filled in, and rough places made smooth, whatever it takes!"

Also from Isaiah, we are looking at the names of the Messiah this Advent. Last week Pastor Steve looked at "Wonderful Counselor" and this morning we're looking at "Mighty God" as another name for the Messiah. While considering this description, we might immediately think of boldness, strength, and power for this "Mighty God." Yet, this Jesus was born into the boldness, strength, and power of Rome. As Dr. Walter Bruggemann wrote in our study book for Advent, "It is clear that he will not compete with the power of Rome on the terms of Rome." Yet Jesus brings a different kind of boldness, strength, and power; not one "grounded in the usual authority of empire; it is not an authority that comes out of the end of the gun or a cannon in coercive or violent ways." Instead, as Bruggemann wrote, "Jesus contains and subjects these deathly, chaotic threats by creating space for new life." This new life is one in which we see the power of this Mighty God in all things.

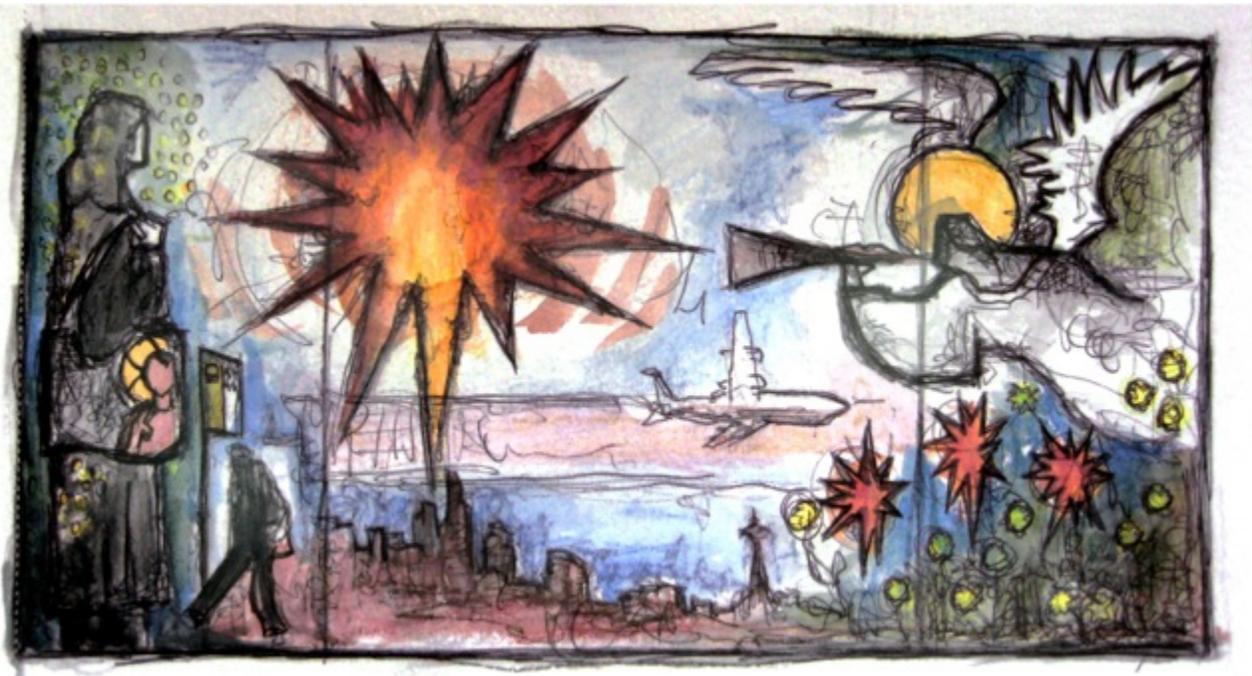
This mighty God, the creator of the universe, the one who gives life, who orders the stars and planets, who causes the sun to rise and fall, who could move mountains and seas, the Almighty One, is also the one who came in the lowliest of places, in a manger, in a human being. If Jesus is the carrier of divine power, the Mighty God, then this divine power lies in humanity, in flesh, in the ordinary. And at Christmas we proclaim along with John, "Prepare the way of the Lord. God is coming to God's people. Ready or not!"

Sounds a lot like having a baby, doesn't it? Tomorrow is my son's second birthday. The day before he was born we drove to IU North for a routine doctor's appointment, at least we thought. We never left the hospital that day. Early the next morning, Zechariah was born. Ready or not! You probably have a story like that too. It sounds like Christmas, doesn't it! It always sneaks up on us, the Holiday that is, but ready or not, it will be here. It's coming. Maybe that's the meaning of Advent, this expectant waiting for Christ to return, is that God is already with us. God is here.

The Franciscan author and teacher Richard Rohr wrote, "The presence of God is infinite, everywhere, always, and forever. You cannot *not* be in the presence of God. There's no other place to be. It is we who are not present to Presence. We'll make any excuse to be somewhere else than right here. Right here, right now never seems enough. It actually is, but it is we who are not aware enough yet." As we enter fully into the Holiday season, how will we make a path for God? How will we be aware of the Presence?

I don't know about you, but it can be hard to be present to the Presence of God shopping at Toys R Us, I wouldn't recommend it this time of year or while perusing the aisles at Ikea. Yet, I am reminded to encounter the divine in all things by author Christine Valter Paintner who wrote in her book *Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of Monk and Mystics*, "We are called to encounter the divine in diapers and disappointments, preparing breakfast and commuting to work, in times of illness and grief, in the person who annoys us, and in the person we don't even notice because we have turned away so many times."

I have a confession to make. While I love this theological belief of being present to God's presence in all things, I can't always make it a practice. There are still times where I feel distant from God. I share that though, fully aware of how my heart feels full watching my son dance and laugh and smile. There are times I'm fully aware of the divine power or spark in him. There are moments when I recognize growth in you, as a congregation, and I know it's the power of this mighty God calling you individually and all of us collectively to create a space for new life. I see the mighty power of God in big things and even small things.



"An Advent Painting" by Matt Whitney. I was really intrigued by the modern imagery behind the angel's announcement and Jesus in the womb of Mary. Beautiful painting!

Yes, there are moments where I can't seem to sense God's presence, and yet, when I'm ready or not, the power of God becomes fully present. Maybe in a diaper, maybe in a

disappointment, maybe in a period of grief and loss, maybe in my sermon prep, maybe in worship and during Holy Communion and yes, maybe even in that person who annoys me to no end. I realize that it's not just an intellectual experience, but a real felt experience of the hope, love, joy, and peace of the divine in all things, the big and the small. Sounds like a mighty God to me.

Perhaps that's the gift of Christmas. Maybe we can all create space for new life, where the divine spark can be experienced in all things. As we wrap the presents, gather with family, remember loved ones who are no longer with us this season, enjoy festive meals together, and enjoy the sights and sounds of the season. Take the time to be aware of the presence of God. Be in the quiet, stillness, and peace this season can bring. That's preparing the way for the mighty God to enter your life again this year. I'm working on it. I'm trying to seek God in the stillness of quiet moments with God. That means I have to be intentional about that time and create space for new life. I invite you to join me in intentional prayer throughout the day, in finding time for silence, and take a daily devotional or another reading this season.

I have to be honest with you, as soon as I turned off the Christmas music this week, yes, I turned it back on. The music of this season can help me experience the joy of this season, maybe I can just call that the presence of God. From the jazz of A Charlie Brown Christmas, the Cathedral hymns of Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral in London, even the soulful sounds of Nat King Cole's The Christmas Song, they can point us to the gifts of Christmas. There's a lot of good about this season of Advent AND Christmas, but you have to slow down and notice the power of God in all things big and small. It's a season of preparation, of expectant waiting, of hope, joy, peace, and love. It's a season that reminds us, "Ready or not, God is right here, right now."

Let's pray:

*Lord Jesus, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.*

*We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.*

*We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.*

*We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.*

*We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.*

*We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.*

*To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" Amen.*

(Advent Prayer by Fr. Henri Nouwen)