

Two weeks ago I suggested and invited you to choose 1 or 4 or 10 things that you would do differently or better as part of your faith workout during this Advent season ... just wanted to have you check in and see how you are doing so far and how you can continue some different practices as the season proceeds...

A guest in a posh hotel came down to breakfast and called over the head waiter and read from the menu, "I'd like one under cooked egg so that it's running, and one over cooked egg that it's tough and hard to eat. I'd also like grilled bacon which is a bit on the cold side, burnt toast, butter straight from the freezer so that it's impossible to spread, and a pot of very weak, lukewarm coffee." "That's a complicated order sir," said the bewildered waiter. "It might be quite difficult." The guest replied sarcastically, "It can't be that difficult, because that's exactly what you brought me yesterday!" A strong reaction to a strange experience wouldn't you say? Today's encounter with John the Baptizer is meant to be somewhat of a strange experience and is intended to provoke in all of us a strong reaction, a strong, life changing, world changing reaction....

These first verses in the Mark's Gospel are both the Overture and the summation to all that will follow: The beginning of the good news - the gospel - of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Then immediately we are thrown into the message of John the Baptist who in declaring the coming of the Messiah quotes from Isaiah 40.

Listen exactly what he said:

Prepare the way - prepare the way of the Lord - prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness.

Make straight the highway - the highway for our God - make straight the highway for our God in the desert. In the wilderness, in the desert every valley will be lifted up, every mountain top will be made low, the uneven ground and the rough places will be leveled. And then, as this happens, as this is happening even today - the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

Mark's Gospel begins in its own unique, sudden and urgent way. No long genealogy, no theological poem, no messengers from on high whispering in Mary's ear about an upcoming and unexpected maternity event. No shepherds in the night hours watching over their flocks, no visitors from the exotic East on a cosmic journey, no Bethlehem, no stable, no manger. As the first to gather and edit and write a Gospel the writer of Mark either has no knowledge of such things that will later enter the Christian memory or if he does know of them he chooses not to include them.

For the editor and writer of the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ originates in the Judean wilderness when a prophet of God named John appeared. John was as we heard a real

throwback, a retro-fit prophet, the first one to turn up in the holy land in over 300 years, dressed for the part in his coat of camel's hair and leather belt – a replica of the get up of Elijah 800 years previously. John had never been to Great Clips, his mane, his beard looked like it had never seen a barber – ever! His strange organic, insect-based diet meant that he was a skinny, feisty creature.

Taking all this together there is a message we are meant to get – John was a messenger – predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, sent by God – a prophet in the classic mold, seeking to get people to pay close attention to God, and John pointed to the One who was even then coming to the world – Jesus .

Across the country, around the world, and at certain points in the day or week on our very own doorstep one of the biggest stress upon people is traffic - there is too much of it, the roads can't cope, the result at times is gridlock. Get behind a parade of school busses on Cherry or Celanese Road, I-77 during a wet rush hour, Carolina Place mall or the Galleria during the holiday period, or getting out of that gas station behind Books a Million – gridlock.

In matters of life and faith – John, the prophet, the messenger of God, announces an end to gridlock - God is coming, God has acted and will act to come to us in our desert, in our wilderness. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah used the image of a highway in the desert when he spoke to the people of Israel in Babylon - his words and this highway held out to Israel the promise of their return home. Isaiah had the cheek, the gall, the faith to use this “highway” image, one that the Babylonian seers and soothsayers had used to describe and celebrate what they thought were the victories of their pagan gods. It as though Isaiah, trusting in the God of Israel stuck out his tongue and made faces at the Babylonian gods and said nah, nah, nah, nah - our God is bigger and better than yours - our God will win the day – we, Israel, will go back home to Jerusalem. There is nothing you can do or say - our God wins in the end!

In a cunning parallel to Isaiah, John the Baptist points once more to the highway in the desert, the highway of God, an end to gridlock, in John's own time and place - the current, contemporary “exile” of Israel under the heel of Roman occupation and the trauma of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The message of the coming Christ, the Messiah, who is the Son of God, comes not in the capital city but in the wilderness. In his words and actions John stuck out his tongue and made faces against those who claimed that Rome's Caesar was divine – said nah, nah, na, nah, nah – Yahweh, Israel's God, is the God whose love and mercy will triumph.

This coming of God proclaimed by Isaiah and by John and by Jesus, this highway is forever sure: It is in and into the wilderness of our lives, into the desert of our experience that God comes to us in Jesus Christ. This coming of God to us and for us is nothing less than Gospel, Good News, because Jesus loves us utterly and so we come to belong to God. This advent of our Savior is Good News because we will never be alone to face our demons or our pain or our hurt. This arrival holds out the sure promise that things will never be the same again, that there is a beginning again, a starting over; that life has meaning, that our lives have a purpose, that there is a hope which can never be shaken.

In Jesus gridlock is ended, God comes to us where we are, and asks us to make our full and free response of faith, love, repentance. In Jesus there is no gridlock, no traffic jam, we have full and complete access to the grace and mercy of God. In Jesus the highway is wide open, toll-free, straight, well-lit, with room enough for everyone. In the advent of Jesus hope, peace, joy, and love flow to and in and for and from and through us.

This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ - no gridlock – God is here, right here with us and for us. We can put our hand in the hand of the Man who stilled the water. We have a Savior, a Master, a Teacher, a Lord. We have One on whom we can rely no matter what.

Seeing that in Jesus gridlock is ended; hearing, tasting, receiving, sharing the love of our God in Jesus Christ; coming to trust, believe, understand and experience that we are the covenant people of God we discover that we have a calling to be curlers. By curlers I do not mean the curlers that we might wear in our hair - but curlers playing a faith version of the icy sport of curling. Curlers who sweep and brush so that others may also be brought close to that which is the central fact in our lives and the central reality in the life of the world - the eternal love of God.

In your faith, in your relationship with God through Christ Jesus our Lord, you have the love and the power to live as Christian women and men and young people. In so living you are free from gridlock - you have been given the gift of new life - and you have the power, the opportunity, the invitation to live as servant people, as curlers - sweeping and brushing, sweeping with passion, brushing with determination so that others, many others can be brought so close to God's love for us in Jesus, that they will find and discover with us the love and the life which is God's gift to us.

The hope, peace, joy and love of this season marks us as belonging to God and such belonging calls us forward to change and repentance just as those who heard John all those years ago in the Judean wilderness. The coming of Jesus, Child of the Manger and Cosmic King asks us to put our lives in order – that we might get back on God's highway or be yet more diligent in journeying to and with our God.

My friends, people of God, this is the call and invitation and purpose of this Advent moment....This is who we are, why we are here, why a table is set before us today.... Outside of, over, beyond, the coming and presence of Jesus Christ nothing else matters, not party or country or color or any other affect or affiliation or loyalty save that of living as curlers free of gridlock in joyful obedience and service of our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God... This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we live faithfully, free of gridlock, willing to be curlers, so that others, many others can themselves experience the gracious, gentle loving of God.

“This is the beginning of the Good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Amen.