

## Wilderness Beginnings

Our scriptures give us four narratives about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth whose birth and anticipated return both are the focus of Advent. We enter the season with reflections on the meaning of his life with four themes represented on the wreath and these candles we light. The first candle was hope. Today's candle was peace. And in many ways both of these themes present challenges for us because both the hope and the peace which are found in Christ are not always obvious because the world around us still seems engulfed in conflict and darkness. That we have four narratives about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, not just one homogenized version is probably a good indication of the complexity which is found in the mystery of how God chooses to redeem humankind. The choice to redeem humanity through the cross is surely a mystery of our faith which is explored, but not really explained in the gospel accounts. In the book *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables*<sup>1</sup>, Robert Farrar Capon talks about two types of power: right handed power and left handed power. Right handed power is that which is exerted directly. It is the one most often seen in this broke world. Those with power use it directly to enforce their will. Since God is sovereign, God could choose to put everything to rights by enforcing his will upon humanity: using God's own sovereignty to bring God's kingdom fully here. Yet obviously that has not been what God has chosen to do. God has chosen to use what Capon calls left handed power to form this world into the Holy City; that New Jerusalem described in the vision of John of Patmos in the final book of our New Testament. Viewed from that perspective, the scriptures have been given to us by God who is present and wanting to move us to make creation true both to itself and to the one who created it. According to Capon, the Bible is concerned with the perfecting of what God made, not preparing for it to be destroyed at some time in the future. The why God has chosen to do it this way is a mystery we cannot fathom, but the four gospel accounts we have each tell us that God is very concerned about us and desires very much for us to seek to live in that close relationship we were created to have. The gospel accounts are in many ways similar, so similar that three of them are considered to have come from the same source document...and that document is actually the one which will comprise most of our gospel reading for the coming year. Yet there are some significant differences, each of these accounts was written long after the events which they describe, although they are written as if the one writing them was there transcribing the events. Each narrative is written with a focus directed to the particular community of believers which has gathered around the author of the text. Each gospel lifts a particular aspect of Jesus' life and ministry which seems to have been of primary importance to that group and their understanding of the mission of Jesus of Nazareth. For example, those believers which probably were mainly from a Jewish background...for them the connection to the Davidic line accounting for the emphasis on the genealogy of Jesus which occurs in Matthew and the many times and ways the Messianic prophecies are fulfilled by Jesus confirms their departure from the synagogue into a new form of Judaism. This year most of our readings come from that primary source document...the gospel of Mark which was written approximately 60 years after the death of Jesus. At first it

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<sup>1</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, William B. Erdmann Pub. Co. Grand Rapids, Mich., 2002

wasn't felt as if there was any need to write or document the narrative about Jesus because he was returning before long...before that type of thing would be necessary. But as time passed, it was realized that perhaps the wait was going to be longer than they anticipated and all those stories, those details that they had been told needed to be recorded before they were lost. So the process of writing down the gospel accounts began...and the gospel account we know as Mark was the first...and he got right to the point of what he considered essential information that all needed to know in his opening statement: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. First, Mark is clear that the narrative he is giving is good news. To him, the beginning of the good news he has to tell happens in the wilderness of the Judean countryside. Mark frames this beginning with words from the prophet Isaiah whose words formed a large part of the tradition of the people of Israel. The prophets whose work formed the Isaiah scroll lived and wrote in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. Their work to bring the word of God to the people began in Jerusalem before the exile with words of judgment and then continued to the people who lived in exile in Babylon. The passage from Isaiah and the gospel passage from Mark both today have the same images about the wilderness. In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet begins by assuring the people that even though they may not see it; though the exile still seems dark, the Lord is preparing a way for them to come home, there is a path through the wilderness being made. The images Isaiah uses are valleys being lifted, mountains and hills being made low, uneven ground being made level and rough places a plain. These images are metaphors for the problems, the issues that have led to the Israelites plight and exile. They are problems that need to be named in order for the way forward to be seen. The Isaiah passage goes on to state that there will be a voice that will cry out in the wilderness calling to prepare a way for the Lord. It is with this passage that Mark envisions the good news that Jesus brings begins. There is a man of God in the Judean wilderness who is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This repentance for sins which John the Baptist proclaims as preparation for the coming of the Lord, Mark sees as opening the way for the good news. John the Baptist is the herald who makes his entrance before the king and announces his arrival. John, as herald, as messenger is to prepare people for the coming one who is greater; the one who will baptize not with water but with fire...the more transformative experience of encountering the Holy Spirit. As we think of the words of Isaiah and John the Baptist, how are we preparing to welcome the Lord? For what Mark had to say in the narrative he gave us was literally just the beginning of the good news. That it began in the wilderness is closer to how the good news begins for many of us. We often receive the good news in some of our darker moments, when there are obstacles in our lives which can be described either as deep valleys or high mountains. It is the presence of the Lord which will lift the low places with hope, bring peace into our lives. The good news of the gospel is that we are not left in the wilderness, obstructed or buried, or meandering in exile. This is the aspect of the good news that is universally welcome. However, there is also a message here that is not quite so welcome. The call for repentance is a call for us to change; to alter some of our ways to bring them more in line with those pleasing to our Lord as part of our preparation of welcome. In Advent we ponder the mystery that God draws close to us with a human face to lead the way to our true home—to draw us into participation in the very life and love of God...that left handed type of power that is a mystery too deep for us to understand. In Advent we prepare our hearts and minds to welcome that power into our lives bringing with it hope and peace, love

and joy. Preparing not only to kneel at the manger in Bethlehem, or to welcome a returning Christ in glory, but a God-With-Us daily Emmanuel daily. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.