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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Advent 2, Year B
Mark 1:1-8

Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear and receive the good news of the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Last month our confirmation families spent a fun evening together learning the story of the Exodus. Like the book itself, we spent most of our time in the wilderness. In fact, four of the first five books of the Bible—sometimes known as the books of Moses—all take place with the Israelites in the wilderness.

Moses led the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt and into a time of wilderness wandering. It was there that they got to know God again. It was in the wilderness that God provided for them, taught them how to live together, and how to worship God again. Though the wilderness was not the land of milk and honey God promised, it was a time and a place of growth and formation for God's people.

Maybe you can think of a wilderness time in your life. The wilderness can be a place or a time of renewal as we retreat to the woods to go camping or hunting and hiking. It can be a time set apart when we leave the duties and work and busyness of our lives to reflect and plan and imagine something new for ourselves—or even just a time to rest.

Sometimes the wilderness can be frightening. It can be filled with worry about what might be coming around the next corner. It can be a time of indecision, even a time of feeling lost.

It is no accident that John the baptizer shows up at the beginning of Mark's gospel account in the wilderness. Mark wants his readers to know that John is not just a weird guy who popped up out of nowhere. John is connected to the promises of God that reach all the way back to the covenant made with God's people in the wilderness with Moses.

His clothing and lifestyle mimic the great prophet Elijah. And the words of Isaiah that introduce John give him credibility. The opening of this gospel declares that the promises made by God in the past are promises that are kept in the good news of Jesus Christ.

And the herald, the announcer of this good news, is John. His role is to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight. His call is to prepare people's hearts to expect and recognize and receive Jesus the Christ when he arrives. And he does that by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance and forgiveness comes in many forms in our lives. Repentance is about turning to a new way, a new direction. It is about turning from a way that serves only ourselves, or a way that feeds our fears or desires, and it's about turning toward a new way, a way that is guided by faith, hope, and love.

And that way is made possible by forgiveness, a release of what has bound us up before and a freedom to go a new way, the way made possible by Jesus.

There was a time in my life when I was in a kind of wilderness. I was angry and hurt and wanted to blame others for my situation in life. And then I went to see a pastor in my town

for help. Surprisingly, she called me to repent for the ways I had participated in the situation I was in.

We went into the sanctuary of the church together and I repented of the hurt I had caused. I repented of the ways I had chosen to neglect my responsibility or had chosen inaction over action. Through this individual confession I was able to name the anger AND the guilt I carried. And then the pastor spoke God's words of forgiveness to me.

That was a pivotal moment in my life. As I left the church that day the circumstances of my life really hadn't changed all that much. But I had turned a corner in my heart and I was able to move forward toward extending healing and forgiveness to the people I once blamed.

On that day, that pastor prepared the way of the Lord in my life. I was wandering in my anger and guilt and those words of forgiveness made a straight path for Christ to lead me in a new direction.

Our reading from Isaiah this morning is the source of this calling to prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah goes on to say, "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."

Here in Central Montana we know about mountains and valleys and uneven ground. This image is an appropriate picture for many situations in our lives. We all have challenges at one time or another. We might feel like we are stuck at the bottom of a valley surrounded by what seem like impossible hills to climb. If only that valley could be lifted up. If only that mountain were a little lower.

I would like to share a situation like that for one family in our community right now.

I serve on the Clearinghouse Connections board and whenever a request for help comes through their office the board members are notified to determine if the request can be granted. This week we heard about a single mother with two preschool aged children.

She is new to town and was able to find both a job and a place to rent. Like most rentals the landlord asked for a deposit and first and last month's rent. The landlord was also willing to take payments for those since the woman didn't have all of that cash up front.

She has faithfully been paying \$350 every other week, but the monthly rent is \$700 so even though she can cover that, she is still behind in fulfilling the deposit and last month's rent. So now she is in the valley of debt, owing \$1800. If she doesn't make arrangements for that soon she may be evicted.

The family is already enrolled in food assistance. This mom would work more than the 30 hours a week she is currently working, but she cannot afford the additional childcare costs that would come with the extra hours. Being new to town she doesn't have family or friends to help with that. All around her are mountains that are too high for this little family to climb.

Here's some good news. Clearinghouse can give up to \$500 per year per person. So that's a start. One of our Clearinghouse board members is Carra Godbey, who is looking into enrolling the older child in Head Start which would help with some childcare costs.

Another board member also serves on the board for an organization called Your Neighbor Cares. They don't have money on hand but they will be putting a request in the newspaper for contributions for this family. If she can receive enough to lift her up out of this valley of debt it looks as if she will be able to stand on her own to provide for herself and her children.

How might we participate in making a straight path for Christ to meet this family? How might we lower the hills they have to climb and lift up the valleys?

Last week our Advent message was to keep alert for the coming of the Lord. Today the gospel calls us to prepare the way of the Lord. John calls us to do that by living out the promises made in baptism.

In Holy Baptism we are given the gift of life that includes forgiveness and God's never ending grace. We hear that good news each time with gather for worship. We receive it in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. And from this grace we are called to live in new ways that "proclaim Christ through word and deed, caring for others and the world God made, and working for justice and peace."¹

God takes the tangible, baptism with water, and gives us power through the intangible, baptism with the Spirit. When we lower the mountains and raise up the valleys for those who are lost in their despair, sin, and the challenges of life, we are preparing the way of the Lord to enter into those lives with the same hope, grace, and promise that we ourselves have received from God.

In the wilderness of our wandering and our wondering, John calls us through our baptisms to come together to hear and receive God's word, to repent, turning from that which draws us FROM God, and to turn TOWARD God by living in the ways of justice and peace.

Our scripture verse for this week in our *Taking Faith Home* insert is from the Isaiah reading today. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

If you would like to make the path straighter for the family in need, we will gladly forward your contribution to Your Neighbor in Need. You may use one of the envelopes in the pew rack or label your check made out to Zion with the words Rent Assistance.

As we move through this season of Advent may our watching for Christ open our hearts to acts of justice that prepare the way of the Lord for a world in a need of God's love and grace.

Thanks be to God! Amen

¹ From the Rite of Holy Baptism