SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT—*PEACE*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*The Edge* Isaiah 40:1-11

 Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptist, lest we miss or forget it, was edgy. Not nervous or anxious edgy. John was edgy in the sense that he really was on the edge, the cutting edge of the new life—the new *world*—that would be established by Jesus. He was the first taste of what was to come. And so, everything about the way he chose to present himself declared that something important, even prophetic, was about to happen.

This is not immediately obvious for many of us today, but in John and Jesus’ day John’s camel hair, leather belt, and strange diet would have immediately inspired memories of another such eccentric—Elijah, the prophet and miracle worker who counselled and often scolded kings.

Living in the time of King Ahab, Elijah’s prophetic calling to account caused him to run afoul of Ahab and Jezebel. He did this by daring to rebuke them for the idol worship Jezebel had brought with her into their marriage and among the Israelite people. He reminded them of their sin and challenged them to repent.

So, John looked to many people in his day to be the new Elijah—the edgy, new Elijah who was going to call the Israelites—the humble and the mighty—back to proper worship of God, and back to right relationship with one another.

John the Baptist was edgy because he also positioned himself—literally—on the outside, or the edges of society.

Mark tells us that John lived out in the wilderness, beyond the city limits. This, no doubt, also reminded the Israelites of their ancestor’s 40-year sojourn with Moses. And so, even though the wilderness was a raw, unsettling place; a place where bandits and wild animals lived; a place to be conquered and defeated, the wilderness was, for the Israelites, also a place to meet and be led by God.

This is where John the Baptist chose to meet the people, and as he baptized them he helped them “crossover” into new life free of sins, by baptizing them in the Jordan, right where their ancestors had also “crossed over” into freedom and new life. So, the wilderness also has its rewards. It can also be a place of newness.

As one African American theologian, Delores Williams, has suggested, the wilderness was also a place where another of their ancestors, the handmaid, Hagar, met God and came into God’s care. Hagar, who was rejected by Abraham and sent out to certain death in the wilderness with her child, was saved by God in the wilderness.

“For African American slaves,” writes Williams, “the wilderness did not bear the negative connotations that mainline white pioneer culture assigned to it.” Instead, “The wilderness was a positive place conducive to uplifting the spirit and to strengthening religious life.”

Perhaps understanding wilderness as a space where faith is cultivated and strengthened tells us why “all the people of Jerusalem” went to John out there, in the wilderness [1:5]. They were drawn to a man on the margins who had a message.

In plain language, just as Jesus was born in a small, out-of-the-way place (instead of a palace), we meet John *outside* of the human seats of power. Or, as theologian Karoline M. Lewis writes in her commentary of this passage:

*The opening of Mark’s Gospel reminds us of the decentering of God’s good news, which is found on the edge…of everything. Goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be. We find ourselves not in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem but outside of her city walls, in the margins, on the sidelines.* [So, t]*he good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there. God’s good news of grace announces God’s presence on the fringe, God’s love that goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, and God’s promise that there is no place on earth God will not go or be for us.*

What we find, on this Second Sunday of Advent, is that we are being asked to face this new life—this decentering of the old life and its power structures, its old political alliances, and arrangements—and allow these to be our words of comfort.

Just as Isaiah begins the 40th chapter of his book with the exclamation,

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
   says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
   and cry to her
that she has served her term,
   that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand*

 *double for all her sins…*so Mark also begins to tell the good news of Christ by bringing an end to the world as it was then known by asking us to look *outside* the ways of life we constructed out of our own image to which we hold on to with stubborn tenacity.

 Instead, we are to look toward the wilderness where John is doing something new. This is where the people’s new life begins as they are washed clean of whatever of the city still clings to them. This is where Jesus will meet John and begin his ministry.

So, John is edgy and on the edge, and we are asked to receive this as news of the peace God longs to bring into our midst, building—i. e. *becoming*—the very road on which God will travel.

Moreover, John may be out in the wilderness, but Isaiah tells us that the comfort God wants us to have will travel *out* of the wilderness and into the heart of our life together *through* us. What John the Baptist is doing in preparing the people so that their lives become the road that invites God into our being. This is our comfort—and our good news.

The challenge to our good news is in the heart of everyone here in this Sanctuary, and in the hearts of everyone who call themselves believers. The challenge is whether we really and truly believe that God’s presence is with us. Are we really building a road through *our* wilderness for God’s divine procession into the midst of our lives?

Each of us will have to answer this for ourself. However, it is important to remember that there will also be places where our answer will involve many more of us. It is also a challenge for us as a community.

There will be times when we will need to come together to build the road for goodness, righteousness, compassion, and justice in our communal and civic life. In the area of leadership on all levels of our civic life together, the “common good,” by its very definition, will only be accomplished if it is shaped by our commitment to compassion, righteousness, and justice. This is where and how we will respond to this challenge as a community.

Although this sounds like a tremendous undertaking, and it is, think about what a difference such a community effort could make, does make. Think of how a new fair and edgy response just might bring change into the lives of:

* the many houseless people we see on the streets every day;
* the continuing burden being put across the shoulders of women throughout the world as we navigate home, work, our reproductive rights and fair wages;
* the many children and adults who come here from foreign countries only to get caught-up in our broken immigration system; and so many more problems we see every day on the news or out of our own windows.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that God’s presence is going to pry open an otherwise closed present. God has done this with many people in the Bible (and in our own lives). In Mark, John the Baptist is one of the people through whom God works. John’s life, as we all know, did not end peacefully. However, we must remember him, and people like him, because he was the one who helped prepare the way for Jesus. He is the one who helps us, even today, prepare our own hearts and lives to let “the dear Christ enter in.” Ultimately, John, like Jesus has committed himself to being the road for God’s love to come into the world. This is our challenge too.

Therefore, as we continue our journey through Advent, let us commit ourselves again to finding ways in our own life that God may use to bring peace into the world. Let us continue in the many ministries in which we are already engaged. But let us also look out beyond our daily routines. Let us be like John the Baptist, whom we well remember—not because of his strange appearance and unappetizing diet—but because of the way he dared to be edgy, to live on the edge.

As Prof. Lewis also writes: *The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves in the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there. God’s good news of grace announces God’s presence on the fringe, God’s love that goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, and God’s promise that there is no place on earth that God will not go or be for us.*

Therefore, let us be edgy like John and be a partner in God’s desire to come into us and bring peace. Amen.