

Expectant Prayers of the Desperate  
Advent 2B 2017  
Mark 1:1-8  
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They're leaving the city. Men and women. Tax collectors. Soldiers. Pharisees and even Sadducees. It seems like everyone is headed to the Jordan River, hoping to hear the voice that trumpets the coming of the kingdom. He doesn't mince words. "Prepare the way of the Lord, Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Folks are crowding in to hear him. To see him. We're pressed in as well. All of us. Pausing, waiting, listening to the voice that calls out to us. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Somebody asks, "What are we supposed to do?"

If you have two shirts, give one of them away. If you have food, share it with the person who doesn't.

The tax collector jumps in, "What about me?"

"Don't collect more than the appointed amount."

"What about us?" comes a voice from a group of soldiers.

"Don't intimidate people. Don't use your position to accuse falsely or take advantage of people. Be content with your pay."

He's not only teaching. He's been baptizing people in the Jordan River as well. Some kind of cleansing. Like a way to start all over again in the new kingdom. When he starts talking about the kingdom of God, a hush moves over the crowd. There is a sense that this could be Elijah. Before we can ask, he says, "Don't look to me. I am only the voice. Another one is coming. He is the king of the kingdom. He is bringing the fire of the Spirit to his people."

And so we watch and wait for the king. He could be here any minute with fire from above.

Why would people leave the security and prosperity of Jerusalem to hear an untamed man preaching at the edge of all that is civilized? He is not simply a sideshow. He's not simply a distraction from the routine of daily existence. No. They are going to him, getting baptized, and confessing their sins.

Think of the risk of confession. Public confession. The shame. The embarrassment in front of others. The risk of exposure, of being vulnerable.

Something has happened. They are no longer comfortable with the old ways and the old promises. Some are desperate. Some are fearful. Some are longing. All have come to the end of themselves. Coming out to meet John in the wilderness is a sign of weakness, of helplessness, but it is also a sign of expectation, of hope. They come, hoping against hope to encounter the promise, the possibility of God's kingdom.

Sometimes I fear our success both in the world and in the church causes us to lose our own sense of helplessness. We are too well off to pray. "Prayer consists simply in telling God day by day in what ways we feel that we are helpless," writes Ole Hallesby.<sup>1</sup> We regularly need to encounter our own helplessness.

When I first started serving in ministry, I lived on a ranch for people who had truly come to the end of themselves. They were desperate for God's Spirit. Desperate for grace. They were hanging at the edge of a rope ready to drop into desolation at any moment. Some did drop and never recovered. Their helplessness shook me.

Raised in a comfortable home with a supportive family, I enjoyed the opportunity to choose my own future. Freedom to play football one year and then switch over to theatre. My biggest worry was driving the old Pinto onto the school parking lot alongside Mercedes and BMWs. I had no grasp of those who struggled to survive from one moment to the next.

Many of the men I met on the ranch had endured suffering all their lives. Raised in broken homes and drug-addicted families, they learned about struggle, violence, and anger. They were old beyond their ages from living on the streets for so long.

They were desperate for help, for love, for someone to listen to their stories. We ate together. Worked together. Studied the Bible together. As they encountered the grace of God with childlike delight, I also heard the grace of God afresh. I come to see that didn't know anything about ministry. I didn't even know how desperately helpless I was until I spent time with these men.

They taught me how to minister. Not how to preach. Not how to be set apart. Not how to lord over people. They taught me to cry out for God's mercy and grace. For all of us were desperate like the disciples at the edge of the river Jordan confessing their sins, being baptized, asking John, "How should we then live?"

As we walk through the season of Advent watching and waiting, we are being provoked by stories of people who cry out, "How long Oh Lord?" "Restore us again O Lord!" "Show us your steadfast love O Lord. Grant us your salvation!" Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we

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<sup>1</sup> Ole Hallesby. Prayer (p. 26). Kindle Edition. "Prayer therefore consists simply in telling God day by day in what ways we feel that we are helpless. We are moved to pray every time the Spirit of God, which is the spirit of prayer, emphasizes anew to us our helplessness, and we realize how impotent we are by nature to believe, to love, to hope, to serve, to sacrifice, to suffer, to read the Bible, to pray and to struggle against our sinful desires."

may be saved!” These are the cries of the desperate, the hungry, the grieving, the anguished, the helpless.

The Christian life can grow too comfortable. Too professional. Too tidy. Too political. Too knowledgeable. If we look around our culture, we see how broken people really are. Our political leaders are in chaos on the right and on the left. From the entertainment world to the business world to the halls of Congress, it appears that an atmosphere of oppression and sexual intimidation thrives.

While we bicker in this country over football coaches and wedding cakes and whether or not you can sing Christmas songs in Advent, the world is in crisis. The Venezuelan people are suffering from little food and lack of medical care. 90-year-olds are trying to escape the country. Migrants are captured and sold as slaves in Libya. A generation of children is being raised in prison with their mom’s in Afghanistan.

Many of these problems go on year after year. And have for centuries. We live in a world at war with God and one another. Reading the news of other nations keeps my perspective in balance and continuously reminds me of my privileges. But it also drives me to pray to cry out for thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

I don’t want to look around at the needy in our community and in our world and then pray like the publican, ‘Thank you Lord for saving me from the disgrace and discomfort of those people.’”

I want the urgency in John the Baptist’s “Prepare the way of the Lord” resounding in my ears and in my heart and in my prayers. Come Lord Jesus. Come quickly!

As we watch and wait in Advent, we are reminded of our weakness, our vulnerabilities, our limitations. But we are also reminded of God’s faithfulness. He has not forsaken the broken and contrite. In the Isaiah reading, we catch a glimpse of the deep mercy and grace of God.

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

*<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the Lord’s hand  
double for all her sins. (Is 40:1–2)*

Speaking to his people who have suffered for their own sins, their own idolatry, the Lord says “comfort, comfort my people.” Yes, they are suffering under judgment, but the Lord has not abandoned them. There is a sense in this passage that the Lord is speaking continuously, comfort my people, comfort, comfort, comfort. He is tenderly addressing the very heart of the fallen, the helpless, the suffering.

The comfort of God, the kindness of God, the gentle care of the Lord is leading the heart to repentance. We see many people in Scripture and in the world who are desperate and in desperate conditions, but we also see an expectancy. God has not abandoned us in our helpless estate. He has not abandoned our world.

In spite of the troubles we see all around, He is present and leading us to Himself. Repentance is not rooted in fear but in hope. It is expectation that He is drawing us to Himself, exposing those actions and those thoughts in us that are at odds with Him and His holiness. As he exposes, he heals. Confession is the gift of bringing our sin and weakness into the light of His love.

His love is safe. He knows us in a way that we don't even know ourselves. Rowan Williams writes, "He is capable of this unparalleled act of 'imagination', of knowing what it is to be a creature as well as creator," knowing what it is to be in doubt, in agony, in temptation, in darkness and abandonment, in hell."<sup>2</sup> We are free to bring all of our shame, our weakness, our evil thoughts, our anger, our lust, our despair, our doubt, our struggle into the light of His love.

In this place, we can cry out for the coming of the Lord.

We really are like the people who leave Jerusalem to go out into the desert to hear John. Even when we don't fully realize it, we are desperate and helpless. Our world is desperate and helpless. In the coming of Jesus Christ, God has entered into this desperate and helpless condition. By His Spirit, he can cry out with us and in us and through for the healing of our hearts and our world.

In Romans 8, we see a threefold cry for the coming of the Lord. The world is crying out, we are crying out, and the Spirit is taking our frail attempts at prayer and lifting up the perfect intercession to the Father.

*<sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

*<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, Rowan. Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses (Kindle Locations 262-266). Darton, Longman & Todd LTD. Kindle Edition. "Whatever we may want to say in detail about the doctrine of the Incarnation, it seems to me an indispensable part of our gospel to be able to say that God has been, and is, 'inside' human motivation. 'He knoweth whereof we are made.' He is capable of this unparalleled act of 'imagination', of knowing what it is to be a creature as well as creator, knowing what it is to be in doubt, in agony, in temptation, in darkness and abandonment, in hell. There is the lesson of 'ecstasy', understanding the other in the other's own terms."

*27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:22–27)*

In this threefold prayer, we are full of expectation. Romans 8 continues, *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Ro 8:28).*

As we watch and wait this Advent, we are not trying to work up sentimental or warm feelings about God. We pray as a helpless people in a world that is helpless. We pray knowing that the only hope for our lives and our families and our problems is the grace of God in Christ. We pray knowing that God has not abandoned this war weary world. So we can and must pray for the nations. For our leaders in their flawed conditions, for the leaders of the world in their flawed conditions, and for the people who suffer under the hand of oppression, knowing that our God knows their pain and their troubles intimately.

We pray in hope and with expectation that He is at work in us and through us even as He is at work in our world and through our world.