

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
December 4, 2011~~Advent 2
Mark 1:1-8

“Who Prepared the Way?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I moved to the Valley, actually to Amherst, in 1980 and began teaching at Hampshire College. It was not an easy time in my life...I was facing a number of struggles. At Hampshire, I befriended a faculty member named Rich who invited me to his home for dinner—he said I would very much like his wife Lois. I think Rich sensed that Lois could help me. I remember walking into Rich and Lois’ home on Strong Avenue in Amherst—I remember the wonderful smell of good food cooking on the stove—the house felt so warm and welcoming. Lois, a weaver, had her big, colorful loom set up at one end of the living room. The whole place was lovely and inviting.

During dinner Lois asked how I was doing. I do not remember exactly what I said, but I do remember talking about how I needed a spiritual home. I had been living in North Carolina and I was involved in a Methodist Church there. I missed my Church and I missed my community. I felt dislocated and far from God.

Although I don’t remember what I said to Lois, I remember clearly what Lois said to me. “You need Quaker Meeting,” she said with surprising certainty. “I’ll take you to Mount Toby Friends Meeting in Leverett. Are you free this Sunday? I’ll find out what time they worship.”

I remember this well because, as we talked further, I discovered that Lois did not even attend Mount Toby Friends Meeting. She knew of the Quakers, she had attended Mount Toby once, maybe twice, but it was not her spiritual home. In fact Lois did not go to any Church. But she seemed definite about it: I needed Mount Toby Friends Meeting and she was supposed to get me there. Lois announced that she would pick me up on Sunday. She had a plan, she was persuasive, she was downright pushy.

Sunday came and there was Lois beeping in her car in front of my house. We went up to Leverett. It was my first experience EVER attending a Quaker Meeting. At the Meetinghouse, a greeter, sensing that I was new, handed me a brochure about Quakers and silent meeting for worship. Lois and I went into the Meeting Room, sat down in silence, and I read my brochure.

During the Meeting for Worship (no Pastor, no music, no liturgy) a few people stood and spoke. These “messages” (the brochure said) were words from God that individuals feel called to share. I was totally taken with this simple, unadorned, quiet form of worship. I felt comforted, held by God, and knew I would return.

In fact I did return, without Lois, the very next Sunday. And in fact I eventually became a Quaker and attended Mount Toby for 14 years.

Mount Toby Friends Meeting was very important to me—it was a place where I deepened my prayer practice and grew spiritually in many ways. I am tremendously grateful for my years with the Quakers. And I am grateful to Lois. She literally took me to a pew at the Friends Meeting and perched me there. Lois paved the way for me to find the very place I needed to be—she ushered in a significant chapter in my life. Let’s keep Lois in mind as we turn our attention to the Gospel of Mark.

Today, on this second Sunday in Advent, we are pondering our friend the wacky and wonderful John the Baptist. A sort of freak, even in his own time, John wandered around clothed in camel’s hair, a leather belt cinched around his waist, and he ate locusts and honey. These were unusually characteristics even in ancient times. Bless his heart, our wild-eyed John did something exceedingly important in the story of our Christian faith: John paved the way for Jesus.

Back to Lois: she paved the way for me to find Quaker Meeting. She made it possible, she “made the path straight,” as we hear in today’s Scripture. There are people in all of our lives who help us find God, people who gesture toward where we should be and what we should be paying attention to. Lois did that for me. And John did that for his community. John paved the way for Jesus to come, he pointed toward Jesus, he gestured toward the one who would follow him.

I love today’s Scripture for many reasons...one reason is that John needed Jesus. Another reason is that Jesus needed John.

It isn't clear at first that John did need Jesus. John had a good thing going on...he had a movement...we are told that people "from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" came to funky John standing in the river Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He had a whole gig going on and it was a successful gig. People came from all over to be baptized by John.

He could easily have taken all the credit, he could have been the big man on campus. He could have never mentioned that someone coming AFTER him would be the real deal. But John and Jesus were cousins. John knew that Jesus was about to come on the scene, Jesus was about to come into his power, Jesus was coming into his own. John knew that the long-awaited Emmanuel, God with us, was coming. John was faithful and astute. He knew that he needed Jesus. He knew that the world needed Jesus.

And so John, in his humility, gestured toward Jesus. He paved the way for Jesus, he "made the path straight."

John talked about himself as the opening act, with Jesus as the headliner. Listen again...

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*

I love that John did not act like he was the big event. John made it clear that the John Movement was really preparation for the Jesus Movement.

John needed Jesus, and Jesus also needed John. Jesus needed John's help. Jesus needed someone to ready the flock, pave the way, prepare the people. Jesus needed John to do the prep work, herald his coming, gesture toward him.

Note that Mark the evangelist, the author of the Gospel of Mark, is so eager to tell this story of John preparing the way for Jesus' ministry that Mark jumps right in.

Mark begins his Gospel with this story of John gesturing to Jesus. There is no birth story, no infant Jesus, no lingering at the manger. There isn't even a story about John's birth or who he is to Jesus (which we learn in the other Gospels). No, Mark is too eager, like a breathless messenger who cannot wait to make an important announcement. Mark jumps right in—with John at the river Jordan, and Jesus soon to follow.

Listen again to the beginning of today's reading, the very first words of the Gospel of Mark...

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*
2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,*
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" '*

Mark does not need a birth narrative...his story begins with John who is telling the story of Jesus. Mark begins with the Hebrew Scriptures...he starts back with Isaiah who predicted that a messenger would go ahead...a messenger would pave the way for Jesus to come. That messenger is John.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,*
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" '*

What a poignant progression:

Isaiah gestures to John.

John gestures to Jesus.

And who does Jesus gesture to? Does Jesus gesture to anyone?

O sure...we get a foretaste of who Jesus will gesture to during his ministry there in the final sentence in the reading. Listen again to the end of the passage...

John proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

That's the big hint. Isaiah paves the way for the coming of John.
John paves the way for the coming of Jesus. And Jesus paves the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

This second Sunday in Advent is a good time for all of us to remember who paved the way for us. If the Bible can admit that someone paved the way for Jesus, we can admit that someone paved the way for us.

We all have ancestors, helpers, angels and guides who prepared the way for us. It is good to remember and lift up those names. Someone prepared the way for each one of us...someone gestured toward God, someone brought us to Church, someone drove us to Quaker Meeting, someone perched us in a pew.

Someone believed in God and believed in us. Someone said that God was filled with love not filled with judgment and they told us that. Someone convinced us that we would be welcomed and included. Someone paved the way for us.

Someone helped you start on your spiritual journey, and you in turn helped someone else start on theirs. You my dear sisters and brothers have had others prepare the way for you... AND you have prepared the way for others.

Someone was your Isaiah gesturing toward the path...
And YOU have been someone else's Isaiah....gesturing toward the path....
You told someone that you love God.
You told someone that you are grateful for community.
You told someone that you feel called to service.
You told someone that there was help and hope.

Someone prepared the way for you to have a closer relationship with God.
And YOU in turn prepared the way for someone else to have a closer relationship with God.

Today's passage from the Gospel of Mark is perfect for Advent...even though there is no birth story, no Mary and Joseph, no inn-that-has-no-room, no taking refuge in a stable out back, no baby Jesus, no Shepherds or Wise Men. The opening chapters from the Gospel of Mark are perfect for Advent because Mark jumps right in with Isaiah waiting for John, and John waiting for Jesus.

It's all about preparing, getting ready. Making the path straight.
Gesturing, pointing, paving the way.

Someone paved the way for you.

And you paved the way for someone. And you need to continue to do that again
and again. Don't hoard the good things you have found in your faith community.

Isaiah pointed to John, John pointed to Jesus, and Jesus pointed to the Holy Spirit.
Now the Holy Spirit is pointing to you...

The Holy Spirit is pointing to you...to gesture to others, to pave the way, to share
the good news, to invite, include and welcome.

Today, on this second Sunday in Advent, I am grateful for grand gestures,
warm invitations, big pronouncements....

I am also grateful for simple things...like a pushy friend and a ride to worship.

Amen.

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