

“A New Way”

I spent Thursday afternoon wandering around the Berkshire Mall. I was looking for Jesus in the midst of all the holiday paraphernalia. I was pleasantly surprised by how much I found even as I was not surprised by how Jesus was dwarfed by the Santas and snowmen. I’m looking forward to the youth group’s input on the question – Santa or snowman, who is the main holiday character?

I found Jesus at the mall; I did not find John the Baptist. He doesn’t fit our version of the story. “Prepare the way of the Lord?” “Repent?” That’s not in the holiday spirit!

Jon Stewart described our spirit Monday night on Comedy Central: Celebrating the early returns from Black Friday, he said, “We spent money we don’t have on things we don’t need for people we don’t like. America is back!”¹

We’re back. We’re getting ready for Christmas in the old familiar way.

But John the Baptist just won’t go away. He cries out to us from the wilderness of our discontent – prepare the new way. He proclaims the presence of possibility – prepare the new way; no more cutting corners – a straight path; no more insider and outsider – a level playing field. It doesn’t have to be that way. A new way is coming. Get ready! “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

This is *Mark 1:1 (NRSV) The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*²

Mark doesn’t begin his narrative with angels and shepherds and wise men. He begins with John the Baptist; he begins with a voice in the wilderness.

The wilderness isn’t our happy place. It’s the place of anxiety and uncertainty. It’s a knit sweater when you were hoping for a radio-controlled car. It’s the opposite of “I’ll be home for Christmas.” It’s a cold dose of reality that shatters all our dreams.

¹ Jon Stewart, “*The Daily Show*” November 28, 2011

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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We can't wait to get out of the wilderness, but the wilderness is the place of renewal. God meets us in the wilderness. God makes us and all things new in the wilderness.

Theologian John Cobb ... claim[s] that God is not only the source of order, but also the "basic source of unrest in the universe" ("Process Theology," 59). That is, God put the system together and God shakes it up from time to time. This is what it means to be the God of the law (i.e., order) and the prophets (i.e., the critique of order and the call for change). This is where the beginning words of Mark point us.³

Advent's call to "prepare the way of the Lord" reminds us that God is always up to something. The moment that changes everything may be right around the corner. God's new way begins where we least expect it, when we don't want it, and how we never dreamed possible. That's true in our lives. That's true in our history.

Consider Thursday, December 1st: While I was wandering around finding Jesus at the Mall, history records the following:

December 1, 2011 was the 56th Anniversary of the day a young, small, black woman got tired. After a long day of working as a seamstress in Montgomery, AL, Rosa Parks was tired. She sat down on the bus. She refused to move 3 feet to the back of the bus; the way she'd always done it before. But she was tired. She refused to move, and her weary courage began a movement that transformed our nation.

What are you tired of? What are you sick and tired of? Repent. "Prepare the way of the Lord." Stop settling for "the way we've always done it;" "that's just the way it is; some things will never change." Repent! Change your mind and change the world! Start daring to be different. Start believing that you can make a difference. Prepare God's new way.

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-joseph-brown-phd/mark-1-1-8-ministry-of-jesus_b_1119478.html?ref=fb&src=sp&comm_ref=false

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December 1, 2011 was also World AIDS Day, a day to be aware of the impact the greatest pandemic since the Bubonic plague is having on our world. But that is about to change! Bono of U2 wrote the following in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*:

I'LL tell you the worst part about it, for me.

It was the look in their eyes when the nurses gave them the diagnosis — H.I.V.-positive — then said there was no treatment. I saw no anger in their expression. No protest. If anything, just a sort of acquiescence.

The anger came from the nurses, who knew there really was a treatment — just not for poor people in poor countries. They saw the absurdity in the fact that an accident of geography would deny their patients the two little pills a day that could save their lives.

This was less than a decade ago. And all of us who witnessed these dedicated African workers issuing death sentence after death sentence still feel fury and shame. AIDS set off an almost existential crisis in the West. It forced us to ask ourselves the big, uncomfortable questions, like whether capitalism, which invented the global village and kept it well stocked with stuff, could also create global solutions. Whether we were interested in charity... or justice.

Yet today, here we are, talking seriously about the “end” of this global epidemic. There are now 6.6 million people on life-saving AIDS medicine. But still too many are being infected. New research proves that early antiretroviral treatment, especially for pregnant women, in combination with male circumcision, will slash the rate of new H.I.V. cases by up to 60 percent. This is the tipping point we have been campaigning for. We're nearly there.⁴

Bono explained on *The Daily Show* that it's a matter of math. When one case of AIDS generates 2 more, you have a pandemic. But when you cut that from 1 creates 2 to 1 creates 1; you reach the tipping point where 1 does not necessarily create 1 and the beginning of the end of AIDS is at hand.

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/opinion/a-decade-of-progress-on-aids.html?_r=1&ref=opinion

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The world did that in 10 years. America led the way in the world doing that. 5 million people owe their lives to American leadership and generosity. Imagine what else is possible! Imagine the other “hopeless” problems we can overcome in 10 years! We can if we will.

“Prepare the way of the Lord.” God is up to something! The moment that changes everything may be right around the corner. God’s new way begins where we least expect it, when we don’t want it, and how we never dreamed possible.

Stop settling for “the way we’ve always done it;” “that’s just the way it is; some things will never change.” Repent! Change your mind and change the world! Start daring to be different. Start believing that you can make a difference. Prepare God’s new way! Amen.