

The beginning of the good news ... often doesn't feel like it.

Mark's story opens with a wild figure, a preacher dressed in camel's hair and dining only on the few delicacies of the desert, shouting at the crowds to come drown their sins in the murky waters of the Jordan.

The prophet Isaiah stands on the eastern edge of the same desert, hundreds of years before, hundreds of miles away, as an equally weird word from the Lord churns in his own chimney, beckoning him to prepare a highway across its unforgiving climbs and valleys, a parade route for political prisoners, a victory dance for a nation long since conquered and captured.

John the baptizer and Isaiah the proclaimer both see with stifling clarity the impossibility of the word burning in their bowels, a word of deep change for an entrenched status quo, a word of hope for the perennially crushed, a word of comfort for the lost and sinful and hopelessly mortal multitudes trapped in exile, trapped in empire, trapped in economic injustice, trapped in despair, trapped in life's slow, circular march toward death.

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The holiday trip to see the beloved begins in the security line at the airport.

The pregnancy begins with sickness in the stomach, and maybe not only for the one who is carrying the baby, as Joseph of Nazareth can tell you.

The spring begins now, here, in the staggering death of autumn and the early onslaught of winter. Leaves fade into the grass, which withers like people and crumples into the earth exhausted, buried with Christ into the mystery of death as nutrition for new life.

Winter comes cold and clear and cruel, and it is the beginning of the good news.

Parker Palmer writes,

Winter in the Upper Midwest is a demanding season--and not everyone appreciates the discipline.

It is a season when death's victory can seem supreme: few creatures stir, plants do not visibly grow, and nature feels like our enemy.

And yet the rigors of winter, like the diminishments of autumn, are accompanied by amazing gifts.

One gift is beauty...

Another gift is the reminder that times of dormancy and deep rest are essential to all living things.

But for me, winter has an even greater gift to give.

It is the gift of utter clarity...

Winter clears the landscape, however brutally, giving us a chance to see ourselves and each other more clearly, to see the very ground of our being. (from Let Your Life Speak)

Winter's gift is the same one on offer from John the deep cleanser and Isaiah the desert bulldozer.

It is the unwelcome grace of clarity that leads down a perilous path to terrifying change...repentance, newness, comfort with power, hope with teeth.

It is the removal of much of what we desperately hold dear: the memories of summer, the sweet

pretense of control, the illusion of immortality, the notion that happiness can be purchased on sale every Black Friday and a joyful future can be financed by Chase.

Advent stirs up the icy voices that expose our lies and shatter our delusions and then dares to name these uninvited voices the *heralds of good tidings, the beginning of the good news*.

Advent comes with truth we do not feel like hearing, rude realities and haunting questions we would rather skip and fast-forward through so we can get to Christmas...why walk the lonesome desert when technology promises to get us there faster and easier?

Advent calls in its wild voice that we need long, massive change, individually and collectively: a flat landscape, a level playing field, a fair economy, a reconstructed system, a highway in the desert, and a bulldozed heart, cleared of clutter, purged of the stuff we hold sacred, the possessions which possess us, the lies which captivate us, the half-truths which, like romantic moonlight insulate us from the dark sides we are frightened to explore.

Advent calls for a barrenness so brutal it forces us to be honest, coming like a thief in the night to clear out everything in our home so that we will finally wake up and see that where we live is not a dream come true but a prison cell made fancy only by our fantasies.

A prison cell, wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he was sitting in one, *in which one waits, hopes, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.* (original source unknown)

Isaiah saw God's children imprisoned in Babylon and in the hopeless fragility of life.
John saw God's children imprisoned in sin, locked in suffocating patterns of behavior reinforced by systems like our own that made regular rejection of God's values seem like the only practical way to survive.

Now we see in the chill blue clarity of Advent that we too are trapped and dependent: our tents on the financial district sidewalk and our savviest phone calls from the corner office above them, our choices in the voting booth, our posts on Twitter and Facebook all have power, but they also have limits, just like our bodies, those marvelous flowers of the field that astonish us before fading away oh so quickly.

We have to see this, we must face the fact that we are trapped, imprisoned, limited, mortal.
We must see that we are trapped in contradictions and compromises, in security lines and situations beyond our full control.

We must stare into the desert and see that it is impossible for us to cross alone.
We must look out the window into winter and recognize that we won't survive out there without help, without shelter and supportive company.

We must look in the mirror and see the grass of the field, the flower that fades, the wonder that withers.

Only then are we ready to hear the voice:
Comfort, comfort my people.
Speak tenderly to her.
There is one coming who will shepherd you across the uncrossable desert, who *will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

There is one who will unlock the prison door, the double bolted minds, the fortified hearts, the closed frontiers, the blocked access, the promised possibility.

There is one coming who will baptize with the holy breath, with the life that never dies.
There is one coming with grace that is double the strength of our sin.

Today, in his name, we baptize Parker Hoffman with water.

He will baptize her with the Holy Spirit, and point her to the wilderness where she does not want to go, and make her see and build a highway where there is no way, and he will frustrate her, and haunt her, and hold her, and carry her in his arms, and lead her home.

Don't be surprised if Parker cries; speak tenderly to her.

She is in for a long, daunting journey, and it begins with a wet winter burial with Christ who saves us all by the impossible way of the cross.

It won't feel good at all.

It is *the beginning of the good news*.