

Let us pray... God of wonder, you are holy. Create a space for holiness in our lives. Usher your Spirit in our midst. Infuse your loving presence in our hearts, calm our minds, and bring us peace... Amen.

The growing season is done for the year, well at least here in Wisconsin...

Most plants have either been harvested, gone to seed, or lay dormant for the winter months ahead...

And yet it is here in the ending of the growing season that we find the beginning of the next growing season...

Because when a plant goes to seed, it produces a seed... A seed that will grow and bring new life come next spring. Death gives way to life...

But in order for that to happen a way needs to be prepared...

Or if the seed metaphor isn't working for you, because it's December, and the Wausau Christmas parade was Friday night, so now you're in all things Christmas mode...

Maybe the song, It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas may speak to you.

You know, "take a look at the five and ten, it's glistening once again, with candy canes and silver lanes that glow."

Well in order for that to happen, a way needs to be prepared also...

And preparing the way, should sound familiar to you this morning... As we heard this phrase in our call to confession, our reading from Isaiah, and our gospel reading...

"A voice cries in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord."

And preparing for God means preparing for the good news.

Like we heard at the start of the Gospel of Mark... Right out of the gates, chapter one, verse one, we hear "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Mark is highlighting the importance of beginnings, and is setting the tone for what is to come. Mark is giving us clues to what we should expect.

And in Mark, that is good news...

However, the gospel of Mark also has a very strange ending...

In fact, Mark has such an unsettling ending, that alternative endings have been written for this gospel...

To refresh your memory... The original ending of Mark is when Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James go to the tomb to anoint Jesus with spices... They are worried about how to get into the tomb, because they know they could not roll away the stone... But when they arrive the stone is moved and they are greeted by a young man dressed in a white robe who says...

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.¹

An ending that intentionally sends us back to the beginning of Mark...

Because we are left wanting to find good news... And learn how we are to prepare a way for the Lord in this new world...

And so, if we were to re-read the gospel of Mark, we might just find that there is good news in this strange ending...

That ending with an empty tomb, was actually the beginning of something new...

¹ Mark 16:6-8 NRSV

And isn't that the case with most beginnings and endings? They are always connected to each other and they are dependent upon one another...

Like a plant going to seed and dying only to produce a seed and bring about life...

Or, another way to think about this cyclical connection is in baptism.

In baptism we are born into Christ's death, so that in our death we can be born into Christ's everlasting life.

Baptisms mark a beginning for us... When we are claimed as a child of God.

Where in a few minutes Josie June Hein will receive the promises of baptism and be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

The same Holy Spirit from our gospel today. The same Holy Spirit that Jesus used to baptize...

As it is through baptism that we prepare the way of the Lord...

Where you are claimed as a beloved child of God... You prepare by being you.

And you leave the heavy lifting preparation to God. As this is done for you, in Christ, through baptism...

In baptism all of God's promises are fulfilled, and you are set free. You are free to live life fully, without worry, because you have received a new birth into a living hope.

Of course, that doesn't mean you won't need to do hard things, endure hard things, or put effort into every day...

Instead, baptism means that God is with you in all things... The Spirit has been poured out to encourage and inspire you. And Christ has been poured out for you just as you are, because you are enough.

It is a countercultural message that gives you freedom. Where every ending leads to a new beginning. Where growth and new life are inspired. Where grace is freely given.

Where you don't need to live into the demands placed on you by society...

Because so often society leaves us wanting... We want that thing to make our lives easier, we want it to be Friday night! Or we really don't want it to be Monday morning...

Which means that we are constantly reaching towards something that is either fleeting, or we are reaching toward some far away horizon...

A horizon we can never quite make it to, because there will always be something more to want...

Leaving us in a constant state of want, need, anxiety, and unease.

But we can rise above societal demands....

When we let God prepare the way.... When we trust in our baptismal promises.... When you trust you are enough.

Just like we discover at the end our Christmas song... "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Soon the bells will start. And the thing that'll make 'em ring is the carol that you sing. Right within your heart."

You prepare the way, just by being you. However, it is you feel called to share holiday cheer and the love of Christ with those who are far or near.

Which means that the stress of this holiday season is real, only if you let it be.

Afterall, isn't that what so many of the Christmas movies get at?

Like in the grinch, Christmas comes without packages, boxes, or bags...

Which is also countercultural. It is the opposite of anxiety producing stress... It is peaceful.

Peace we see mirrored to us in the earth throughout these winter months,
while life lays dormant and is still.

Peace that burns in our second advent candle.

Peace, you receive from God through baptism.

And baptism is such a beautiful beginning... Not only is it how we prepare
the way... Baptism sets the tone for what is yet to come... Amen.