

Second Sunday of Advent

STRAIGHTENED AND LOOSED

Mark 1:1-8

Second Sunday of Advent Analysis by Chris Repp

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Crooked and Bound

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Crooked, Uneven Ways*

It doesn’t take a prophet to tell us that things aren’t quite

right. We know that just by living. Life is no picnic, and all around us are those for whom it is even more of a burden than it is for us. How many are unemployed? How many work long hours for low pay? How many risk life and limb just for the opportunity to work for that low pay? How many, in spite of their hard work, do not have access to healthcare, or education? Or healthy food, or decent housing? And then there are those who are afflicted with cancer or genetic disease, and others who face oppression and violence. No doubt about it, our world surely needs straightening out.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Bound to Sin*

Are we, who have what others lack, more deserving? Do we work harder? Are we somehow more valuable to society? We want to believe the hype, that everyone has an equal chance to succeed if they make the right choices in life and work hard. We want to believe it in part because it gets us off the hook, helps us evade responsibility for things not being quite right. But we know in our hearts that there is an unevenness built into the way things are, an unfairness that we have benefitted from and in some case have even helped to perpetuate. On our good days we want to do something about that. We want to be loosed from our sin and the crookedness of this world.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unworthy*

Problem is, we haven't just bent out of shape the world God gave us; we've also made crooked our connection to God. It is that path that the prophet calls us to get straight. Unfortunately, that is beyond our capability. We cannot, even on our good days when we might want to, repair what has been broken; we cannot straighten and smooth out what is uneven, rough, and crooked, that stands between us and God. Not even the herald sent to announce the Good News can do this with his baptism of repentance. "Loose the bonds of sin? I can't even loosen his shoestrings!" he says of the coming One. If even the holiest of

holy men is powerless in the face of sin and death, what hope do we have?

PROGNOSIS: Straightened and Loosed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Worthy*

What is beyond us is not beyond God. The one who comes, this Jesus Christ whose Good News the evangelist begins, is none other than God's Son. Mightier than the herald, he comes to set things straight by enduring the crookedness and unevenness of this world. In doing so, he blazes a trail straight through the Gospel of Mark and between heaven and earth. (The word for straight in v. 4, εὐθείας, is used repeatedly in Mark in its adverbial form, εὐθὺς, to move the action forward, with the meaning "immediately" or "straight away.")

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Loosed from Sin*

In Jesus' death and resurrection, God stoops down to loose the bonds of sin that the herald's best efforts can't effect. Baptism into this death and resurrection brings the Holy Spirit, who works faith in all the undeserving baptized, so that they might trust the Good News proclaimed and embodied in Jesus Christ, and so trusting may receive what it promises.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Straight Ways*

A life lived trusting in God's Good News sets about straightening and leveling the crooked, uneven world. It opens up paths of relationship with others, paths of caring and action. In our giving, our voting, in petitioning our government, in our entrepreneurial service we remember the unemployed, the underemployed, the deployed, the immigrant, the underserved and marginalized, the sick and disabled, and the prisoner (see last week's gospel text from Matthew 25!). We live in hope, trusting that the crooked, uneven world is even now being straightened, evened, and loosed from sin by body of the risen Christ active in the world by the power of the Holy

Spirit.