

## Advent 2: Get Up and Act!

While I was learning skills that would be useful once I was ordained to the priesthood, I took some training in clinical-pastoral education at Sunnybrook Hospital. Our training was done using a medical model: I was part of a group during this learning process, and each of us had to take a turn doing a 36 hour shift, sleeping overnight at the hospital and responding to pastoral emergencies in the wee small hours of the morning. I vividly remember the sound of that beeper going off beside my bed and awakening me from my dreams. When it went off, it was time to wake up, get up and act!

This is what the opening of Mark's Gospel is like, Tom Wright says in his book titled *Mark For Everyone*. (N.T. Wright is Canon Theological at Westminster Abbey). It's a great way to start, because what Mark is telling us is that that's what John the Baptist was like to the Jewish people of his day. Many had been looking for a sign from God, but they hadn't expected it to look like this!

Many had wanted a Messiah to lead them against the Romans, but they weren't anticipating a prophet telling them to repent. Some thought John was mad telling them to get ready for the greatest moment in Jewish history, in world history.

Every year at passover, the Jews recited the story of the exodus from Egypt, telling over and over how God rescued Israel from Pharaoh, and brought them through the Red Sea and away across the wilderness to their promised land. Along with the creation story, it is the most important story in the whole old testament—and John's hearers would have known it well.

But instead of simply hearing the words and remembering the story, John was turning it into a drama, a play, and telling his hearers that they were part of the cast. They were to come through the water and be free. They were to leave behind "Egypt"—the world of sin in which they were living, the world of rebelling against the living God. They, the Jewish people of the day, were looking in the wrong direction and going in the wrong direction. It was time to turn round and go the right way [that's what "repentance" means]. It was time to stop dreaming and wake up to God's reality.

The challenge had a sharp edge to it. Someone was coming, coming very soon, and John was getting people ready. John was the messenger going ahead, getting everywhere ready for the 'stronger one' who was coming after him. The people as a whole needed to smarten up. Someone was coming who would put even John in the shade.

Who did John think this 'someone' was? It's not clear from Mark's writing, and perhaps it wasn't clear even to John. He may well have thought it would be yhwh himself, Israel's God in person. Or he may have thought it would be the Messiah. Or he may have

thought it would somehow be both. But what this figure would do was quite clear. What John had done with water, the coming one would do with spirit—the Holy Spirit.

This promise—it's a warning, too, of course, but basically it's a promise—picks up some more of the Jewish freedom images from the old testament. Mark points in the same direction with two biblical quotations, from Malachi and Isaiah, that open the story.

One of the great promises that Israel had cherished for centuries was that when yhwh finally made the exodus story happen all over again, setting his people free once and for all, that would be the time when he would come to live personally with his people. He would be with them; he would be their God, and they would be his people.

How would he do this? In the original exodus story God's presence lived with Israel in the pillar of cloud and fire. This time it was to be similar, but different. God's spirit would live with people, in people, becoming the air they breathe, the fire in their hearts. This is the promise they had lived on. John says it's now going to come true.

But are they ready for it? They certainly weren't ready—and perhaps John wasn't either—for what they got. The main thing Mark gets us to do in this opening passage is to sense the shock of the new thing God was doing.

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Just when I was dozing a bit, suddenly the beeper would go off: it was time for action. That's the mood here. It raises the question for us too: Where are we asleep today, in our churches, our communities, our personal lives? What might it take to wake us up?

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