

*“John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins.”*

Did you hear [read] that? **Everyone** went to the Jordan River.  
**All the people** went to the Jordan River.

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Here’s what I want to know: who were **all** these people? Who were these men and women and children who traveled from their settled, familiar homes out to the barren and arid and forsaken wilderness—and all for a God-man they had never met? This wasn’t the first time there had been rumors about someone who had the promised to fix what was broken if everyone just got on board. Plenty of people had had the audacity to claim that “they” were the ones who would save the people from their troubles, which is to say that John’s declaration to “prepare the way for the Lord” wasn’t without precedent.

And yet, people came.

All of them, Mark says.

Not simply the well-to-do or the poor.

Not simply the young or the old.

Not only the employed, but also the unemployed.

Not merely men but also women.

Not only the ones who attended the synagogue for worship each Sabbath, but also the ones who only showed up for high holy days.

Everyone.

How could people so different from one another find common ground in a ragamuffin guy in place far from home, far safety and familiarity and comfort?

Surely, they had to have been desperate—desperate for any sort of relief from the emperors and systems who demanded allegiance and obedience but offered little in return.

They also must have been hungry—hungry for peace—and not the kind of passive veneer of friendliness that passes for peace, but a lasting peace that told them they mattered, they belonged, their lives were worth something, their futures were not a mirage.

To make the journey to the wilderness in droves like they did, they probably also had to have been weary of the status quo, the political bickering, the endless war between nations. They wanted the grace to endure. They need the grace to endure...to have hope, to carry on.

None of this makes them terribly remarkable or out of the ordinary though because along with their yearnings, they had fears and hangs-up. They lived with prejudices and pride. They had baggage and childhood trauma and financial responsibilities and exhaustion and children and the desire for children.

And if we're honest, if we shake off the temptation to put on the smiles and forced gratitude and good cheer that we often bring to church of the weeks leading up to Christmas, all of these people are no different than you and me.

Aren't we desperate—desperate for an end to this virus and distance?

Aren't we weary of the status quo—weary of war,

weary of the political rhetoric,

weary of the unacknowledged or dismissed biases and prejudices that oppress so many of us day after day?

Aren't we hungry—hungry for a world in which God's glory and peace and justice are experienced by everyone, where our circumstances and backgrounds don't become inhibitions to our futures?

Aren't we also in the wilderness—a place of barrenness and uncertainty as we navigate this tumultuous year?

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I'd argue that yes, we are all of these things. Here's the thing though—all of us—with our baggage and pride and dreams and hunger and desperation—just like our ancestors in the desert are the Good News of Jesus Christ. According to Mark, the Good News doesn't begin in a manger, or on a starry night, or with a family of refugees on the run. "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ," starts in the Godforsaken place that is the wilderness when God's people heed the words of the prophets from long ago and dare to make their dreams and God's dreams one. They do not try to perfect or gloss over their yearnings and longings as they come to be renewed. They don't try wrap their individual and collective dreams into neat, pithy goals fit for a strategic plan or social media post. They say, "I've gotten it wrong. I need you God." They come as they are, with all that they are and hitch themselves to a hope far richer and deeper than they can imagine and maybe even believe is real.

And without them,

without their humility, without their honesty, without their need and their dreaming, there would be no Good News.

For the Good News of Jesus Christ is not simply that Jesus was coming. The Good News is that Jesus came for **us**—for this world, for you and for me.

Without us, the Good News is incomplete.

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I am not sure what brought you here to worship today—whether habit or boredom or desperation or love or what—

but if you hear nothing else, hear this: As it was true for our siblings in the Middle East two millennia ago, so it is for us today: there is no Good News of Jesus Christ without you. The Good News of Jesus Christ—of God becoming human so that we could experience the fullness of Love—a love that transcends a Hallmark card or Lifetime movie or New York Times wedding announcement; a Love that sits with us and holds us when we're at the end of our rope; a Love that calls us out of our worst selves, out of our trauma and drama and heals us to a full life; a Love that celebrates and honors differences and makes space for them at the table; a Love that will not force itself on us nor will resist our anger and abandonment; a Love that will wail in the night with us and will die on a cross to prove that we are worth fighting for, *you are worth fighting for*; a

Love that will not let the worst of life get the last word. This Love that is the Good News came for you, is incomplete with you, and is for you.

Just sit with that. Out of all the places and situations and people you have looked to, it's here in your wilderness situation, in your Advent longing and doubt and desperation that the Good News comes begins. In *your* life.

What then, would it mean to live as the Good News?

For one thing, it would mean that like John the Baptist, you need not be in the spotlight to make a difference. You don't have to be on a committee or have a title alongside your name. But it does mean being willing to change when the situation calls for something different, something that may even be hard or out of your comfort zone. It means to serve, to work for a goal much larger than your own immediate wants. It means showing up to things like Sacred Ground week after week doing the hard work of racial reckoning even if you are certain that "you don't have a problem," because the heart of being a Christian is recognizing that none of us has fully arrived yet. We all have room for growth.

It means refusing to settle for things as they are in this world and then engaging on how to make it better. What can and will I do for others today? How can I become more like the person God has created me to be—loving, compassionate, dreaming, merciful, compassionate, and in service to the Love that changes lives—even when it seems like change isn't happening at the speed for which we thirst, for our kingdom is not of this world.

And living into the truth of the you being a part of the Good News also means getting out of bed when it's hard to do so. It means staring down the darkness that hovers like a cloud and remembering the words of the prophet that God is here, God is coming. To live the Good News, to live the heart of Advent is to "recognize that absence of peace now and also the exquisite certainty of its coming."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler, *The Season of Advent: A 4-Week Devotional* (2020), 17.

You were not created to watch life happen. You were created to participate in the coming of God's reign—with all that you are and as you are—not as someone else does. Friends, like John, you are the beginning of the Good News. You are the preparer of the Anointed One. You, with your baggage and fears. You who hopes against hope. You with your unique proclivities. You! You who shows up to live and refuses to settle for what is are the Good News.

Through your baptism into Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection,  
That is who you are.  
And that is who you will always be.

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