

Year B, 2017
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Advent 2
St. Mark 1:1-8

✠In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In George Bernard Shaw's play, *Back to Methuselah*, the Serpent says to Eve: "You see things the way they are and ask, 'Why?' I dream of things that never were, and say, 'Why not?'" It's a great line...but I think Shaw gives it to the wrong character. To dreams of things that never were and wonder why not is, I think, characteristic not of tempters, but of seers. John the Baptizer was a prophet. Prophets are not fortune-tellers, forecasters or doomsday prognosticators. Prophets are seers in the best sense of that word. John the Baptizer was a seer who saw what was (he courageously and accurately called things as he saw them); but as a seer, he not only saw what was but saw what never was. He saw what could yet be in spite of everything to the contrary and proclaimed that vision right into the face of all that is. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," John proclaimed in the wilderness. They came out to hear him preach—some to mock, some to be entertained, some out of curiosity... but mostly they came because John spoke a word of hope to the hopelessness of his time and to people who were hungry for hope.

There were skeptics, of course. There always are. This preacher of "good news" was in the wilderness preaching from the margins of society, not from the Jerusalem center of power. That's no place to start a revolution! Neither is it the place to begin "good news." Cynics wondered when and where the good news would really begin. Three wise men were the only other ones who figured out the when and the where (with the help of a bright star). That was Bethlehem. And as for Nazareth, the hometown, it was not uncommon to hear people say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:45f.)

Can the good news begin in this time of moral bankruptcy? Can it begin in this age of secularism and religious decline where the NONES (not "N-U-N-S", but N-O-N-E-S) are the fastest growing "religious" affiliation in America? Can good news really begin when the only people who approve of Congress are their immediate family members...or in this time when our house is so divided it stands on the verge of

collapse? Can there be any good news in this time of climate change with its rising sea levels and destructive storms? And how in heaven's name would this new vision take shape? Certainly no good news would have its beginning with the rift-raft who flocked out to the wilderness to be brow beat by John. And certainly not by self-righteous religious leaders who have sold their soul in exchange for political influence. The beginning of the good news, indeed!

This, however, *was* the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because the beginning of the good news is always found in a vision of hope in the midst of hopelessness, of new possibilities in the midst of all the world's impossibilities, with a vision of what, in the grace of God, might yet be in the face of all the "stuckness" of what is... of all the bad news.

This past week Patty and I were in New York to see the Rockette's Christmas Spectacular—and spectacular it is...it always is. I was 12 years old when I first saw them. We saw them a few years ago when they came to Buffalo. They're precise to perfection. And they always do the same thing. Oh, they change the songs, tweak the sets, change the color of the lights, but it always includes the same things—the shopping bus routine, the march of the tin soldiers, Santa does the narrating. And the climax of the show is the visit of the Wise Men to worship the Christ Child. They do the same thing every year and have since the 1920s. They almost lost Radio City Music Hall to the real estate developers, always looking for an inch of real estate to raise a million. Fortunately enough New Yorkers said "Enough," and it was saved. Some come to see the girls, some to be dazzled by the spectacle, some by the art of the dance, some to be inspired—we went when the place was filled with little girls. But many, I believe, come to hear a message of hope in the hopelessness of this time: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

John didn't try to reassure the skeptics or convince the cynics. It was not his task to answer any of their questions. His only task was to proclaim the vision: "There is one coming...who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Advent is a time of preparation. We are to get ready for the

Coming of the One who will bring God's kingdom of justice and love to full fruition. In the midst of the hustle and bustle, the chaos and confusion and the competing demands of modern life, we are called to sound one clear note and tell one true story. Some will be ready to hear it. Some will not. Our task is to keep telling the story so that when others are ready to hear it, it will still be there to be heard. That's how we prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.