

Advent Study: Road Trip

Week #2

Introduction

It's the second week of Advent, and as you might recall, last week we kicked off our Road Trip: Journeying to Christmas series. We started by packing up, making sure we're ready for the journey ahead, just like those anticipating the arrival of the Son of Man. This week, we're on the road and maybe already starting to get a little antsy about the drive.

Have you ever noticed that when you set out on a road trip, after the initial excitement wears off, there's always that voice from the backseat that asks, "Are We There Yet?" The question may then be repeated *over and over*.

The anticipation—the longing to reach our destination—grows with every mile.

In Mark 1:1-8, John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus. He voices that same anticipation and longing, reminding us that something significant is on the horizon in the one who will come and make all the difference by baptizing us with the Holy Spirit.

John's message speaks not only to his first century audience, but calls to us today, like a spiritual GPS, pointing us toward the hope of Jesus' arrival in the world.

Now, if you've ever been on a road trip, you know that the GPS doesn't only give directions, but it often also gives an estimated time of arrival. While we're eager to get to our destination, let's embrace this moment of waiting with gratitude, resisting the urge for instant gratification, and the desire to ask, "Are We There Yet."

Let's journey forward!

Illustration Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOW_kPzY_JY

In this episode of "The Office," Michael Scott drives his car into a lake because he's blindly following the GPS.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Do you use GPS? How often? What do you think of your GPS? A necessity for every drive? Only occasionally when you've never been to a particular destination before?

2. Has your GPS ever taken you on the wrong route or to the wrong destination? Was it *actually* the fault of the GPS? What was your initial response (laughter, anger, fear, frustration, etc.)? How did you eventually get to your destination? When you look back at this situation, how do you feel about it now?
3. In the video, Michael follows the GPS blindly. Have you ever done this? What was the result? Is there anything else that you have followed blindly? If not, have you ever been tempted to do so? What was the result?
4. Dwight's response is exaggerated for comedic purposes, and in doing so claims to have been trained for the circumstance they're in. When you have found yourself in a difficult situation, do you feel prepared "for such a time as this?" If not, is there anything you can do to help you feel more prepared?

Scripture: Mark 1:1-8 (CEB)

¹The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, ²happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

Look, I am sending my messenger before you.

He will prepare your way,

³a voice shouting in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way for the Lord;

make his paths straight."

⁴John 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. ⁵Everyone 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. ⁶John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Supplemental Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11 (CEB)

¹Comfort, comfort my people!

says your God.

²Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended,

that her penalty has been paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins!

³A voice is crying out:

"Clear the Lord's way in the desert!

Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

⁴Every valley will be raised up,
and every mountain and hill will be flattened.
Uneven ground will become level,
and rough terrain a valley plain.

⁵The Lord's glory will appear,
and all humanity will see it together;
the Lord's mouth has commanded it."

⁶A voice was saying:

"Call out!"

And another said,

"What should I call out?"

All flesh is grass;

all its loyalty is like the flowers of the field.

⁷The grass dries up

and the flower withers

when the Lord's breath blows on it.

Surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass dries up;

the flower withers,

but our God's word will exist forever.

⁹Go up on a high mountain,

messenger Zion!

Raise your voice and shout,

messenger Jerusalem!

Raise it; don't be afraid;

say to the cities of Judah,

"Here is your God!"

¹⁰Here is the Lord God,

coming with strength,

with a triumphant arm,

bringing his reward with him

and his payment before him.

¹¹Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;

he will gather lambs in his arms

and lift them onto his lap.

He will gently guide the nursing ewes.

Scripture Discussion Questions

1. Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope to a people who are in exile from their own land. How can you understand and appreciate this good news in a position of relative comfort and safety? What are the barren and “exile” places in your own life? Does this passage bring comfort there? If so, why and how?
2. Read Isaiah 40:11 above. If you can, use a picture of the Good Shepherd (such as Katherine Brown’s image “Jesus and the Lamb” shown to the right). Can you visualize yourself as a lamb in Jesus’ care? Are you able to be vulnerable enough to be cared for and held in the arms of God? If this is difficult, consider what it means and what it takes to entrust yourself to one another and to God.
3. Mark 1:2-3 likens Isaiah’s messenger to John the Baptizer—the one crying out in the wilderness. Who today raises the prophetic voice from the “wilderness” to call the community to repent, reform, or reclaim the good news? What does that wilderness look like today? What sort of resistance does that modern-day prophet encounter?
4. John looked (and seemed) a bit wild to his contemporaries, yet the “whole Judean countryside” flocked to him and confessed their sins. What do you think made him such a compelling person? Can you imagine who today would have such compelling and legitimate power? What does it take for you to trust a call to repent and follow?
5. Take a look at the promises made by or on behalf of a person being baptized (linked here: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>). Are these promises you actively remember? Act upon? In what ways do you embrace the vow concerning justice? In what ways do you fulfill the promise to nurture others as a congregational member?



More Questions Framed Differently

1. One name for God is Comforter or Holy Comforter. What does the Isaiah passage say about God as Comforter?
2. What other names for God do you see in this passage? Which of these names do you like best and why?
3. What other attributes of God do you see in this passage? Which of these attributes do you think our church recognizes most often?
4. How does the Mark passage bring comfort to those who are struggling or waiting?
5. Where in your life (or in the world) do you sense the need for God’s comforting presence?

Weekly Action

Consider your traditional family preparations for Christmas. Perhaps they are complete, perhaps they’re underway. Maybe they include lights or trees or nativity scenes. If you don’t have these listed out already, write

out each one on a piece of paper or type them on a digital device. Then write or type an equal number of steps for how you will prepare your heart and/or your spirit for the Christmas celebration. Remember that Christmas is a celebration of the *incarnation* of God in the world, and let this inform the preparatory steps you list for preparing your heart and/or spirit. Take time to pray! Then begin these steps with a goal of completing them before Christmas!

Prayer

Creator God, as our journey continues, let Your voice be the GPS that directs our path. Amidst life's detours and confusing crossroads, may we keep our eyes fixated on you. Lord, as we heed the call of John from the wilderness, grant us patience as we navigate this path. Fill us with wisdom to see Your signs and landmarks along the way. Help us trust Your guidance, ever eager to greet the gift of Jesus, our ultimate destination and guiding light. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.