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"Northers and Good News" The Rev. Garrett Lane (12/10/2023, The Second Sunday of Advent)

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord our strength and our Redeemer, and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
I've got a word that some of you might be new to some of you, and it describes a weather phenomenon that happens in Texas. I learned this word from family. My family originally, part of them are from West Texas, so I heard this word, not often growing up, but when we would come out and visit in these winter months, I'd hear this word, and if you've lived here any number of winters, any number of winters in Texas, you've experienced what this word describes, but I'm going to give you a nice little Texan dialect treat today. I like little dialect things, it's fun. I've actually heard this is in Oklahoma as well. Someone after the 730 was like, I was in Oklahoma and I heard it too, and I was like, okay, okay. But so in West Texas, when a storm comes through suddenly, and it brings really cold winds, really icy temperatures, they call it a northern. Have we heard this before? Yes, the Oklahoma is not in, yeah. In the tan handle, it hasn't even more specific title, a blue northern. And when a blue northern runs through, I didn't know blue northern, I knew northern. So, Arctic winds blow through the great plains in both Canada and in the United States, and as these winds come down, we don't have anything like the Rocky Mountains or the Appalachian Mountains to block the wind that's coming down from the

Arctic temperatures. And so, it hits us full force. And you guys know, you've been outside on a sunny 80 degree afternoon, and you see some kind of some clouds blow through and you're like, oh, this is not too bad. But by the time the sun sets, it's like 20 degrees, windy, and you're shivering at home. You've experienced this, a northern. And these blue clouds, the blue northern, characterize so much of the pan handle in Oklahoma. And you can see, it's this deep blue that's kind of like bluer than the sky. And as it's coming, it's coming towards you, and it's bringing something that you don't, you don't know how it's going to end up maybe sometimes. Like in 2021, when that storm came through, and it brought a lot more ice and a lot more snow than we expected. All of us probably remember the storm of 1899 as well, which brought temperatures below 12 in Amarillo, and even froze. I'm not, I'm not lying here, you can go look it up. It was in the New York Times, I found out, but I don't have a subscription, so I couldn't access like the old thing. Anyway, so this storm in 1899, temperatures below 12 in Amarillo, and part of the Bay of Galveston, which is part of the Gulf of Mexico, had a thin sheet of ice over it. It got so cold. And for many, these deep blue clouds function the same way that are mark passage that we heard today, how John the Baptist in mark, how mark quoting Isaiah, which is another reading we could have today, they tell these people that something is on its way. John says, someone's coming after me, Isaiah says, make a highway in the desert. By the time these clouds are noticed, the wind has already started to pick up. Our season of Advent, expecting and preparing for the arrival of Christ, is kind of a northern in and of itself, stirring up our attention and orienting us towards what is bearing down and what is coming soon. John the Baptist is this wild figure in the Gospels, especially in Mark. He stirs people up, like these storms, he agitates them. And I imagine him preaching, when I think about John the Baptist preaching, kind of with one hand outstretched all the time, pointing at Christ. Any time he speaks in these Gospels, he's talking about someone else, he's talking about Christ. He announces the coming of Christ. And he's painted with more colors, I would say, in other Gospels, like Matthew and Luke. But in Mark, his

words for Advent,
that the Messiah, the Christ, is coming already, is his defining characteristic.
In other Gospels, we're told he's the cousin of Jesus, that he is a preacher,
that he baptizes Jesus, and that eventually his preaching is what gets him killed.
And I think it's important to remember his death, because John is first and foremost a preacher.
He wears the skin of animals, camels. He makes his protein shakes with insects. He
chooses on honey from the comb. He is a sticky, dirty, unkempt man who is full of terrible knowledge.
And in Christian iconography, you can see, he's often illustrated with wings, like the wings of an
angel, not because he had wings, but because, that made me laugh, not because he actually had wings,
but because he is, like angels, a messenger, he brings a message that Christ is coming,
and that he is the one who is going to say, everything will be changed.
Our reading today says that he's preaching baptism, that his baptism is with water,
but Christ will come, and he will bring a baptism with the Holy Spirit.
And when I think about John in the wilderness, you can see he's holding his head,
typically in Christian iconography as well, in which is the manner of his death.
This would be kind of the wilderness that he might have inhabited. I often think of it as kind
of like Tatooine from Star Wars out in the desert, but it's a little more green than that,
at least part of the year. This is a monastery not far from where allegedly John, the Baptist,
was born. But John has read these scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, the prophets,
the law, the Psalms, all of the story of how God interacts with our world, with humanity.
And his sermons, like our New Testament writings, are soaked with these Old Testament scriptures.
So much of what we read and what we have from the New Testament has the Old Testament baked into it.
It is this constant conversation that is happening, quoting, alluding, gesturing, witnessing,
to the work that God has already done. That God has already done in breaking into our world.
It ties together the witness, and John, and Mark tie together the witness of what God has done,
with what God is doing, and what God will do in the future, flattening

and condensing those three things to show one full account of the work of God in Jesus Christ. There is no God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament for John. God is on the move. There is an urgency to his preaching. God is about to be here. And Mark writes in this way, where John has read the prophet Isaiah, he knows the Psalms, he knows this fragility that life has, that all people are like grass from the Isaiah reading today. And most importantly, he knows the expectation that his people have, that they've been delivered by God in the past, and that God has promised to deliver them again in the future. And most importantly, that this is a God who makes good on God's promises.

The story that everyone was familiar with, and most people still are, that defines everything in the Old Testament, is the story of the Exodus. Any prophet that's worth his salt calls back to this story. How God heard their cry, the cry of his people, raised them up, brought them out of Egypt, out of suffering, and slavery into a place that was safe. It is one of the most important theological statements in our scriptures that says something about who God is. God as a God that goes and saves people, delivers them from distress, and that humanity and their well-being is very close to the heart of God. The 1977 Kansas album, point of no return, which this isn't a cover of that. This is the single they released for the title of the song, Dust in the Wind came out in 1977. And if you don't know this tune off the top of your head, like me, you'll recognize it if you listen to it outside of this context just by the guitar that kind of goes in the beginning, the tune. It's a song that's about mortality, about how fleeting life is, and draws examples and descriptions from the book of Ecclesiastes, about how we are all dust and will fade away in due time.

Does this sound familiar? Yeah, we hear this in the Bible. Spoiler. The mortality of life is a sure thing, but not something we often look directly in the eye, but Advent brings us kind of to this place to consider these things. And in reading some of these interviews with the band Kansas about this song, I learned that the guitarist Rich Williams would often say that they were surprised that this song was a hit. It doesn't follow the typical one-hit wonders of the time, and it's a song that quite frankly is a little morose, a little a

little bit of a downer,
but it was a hit for many years. The band loved the song.
They loved the tune,
which was originally composed as a finger picking exercise, as a
guitar finger picking exercise,
and had such sway. And later in this service, Ryan will be playing it
for, no, he won't be doing it.
But this is not exactly the stuff that one-hit wonders are typically
made of,
but here's what I want to get to. In the early 2000s, there was a
Spanish band called Mago de Oz,
Wizard of Oz, and they took this song and they wanted to do a cover of
it, meaning they wanted
to use the same tune, the same rhythm, the same voice things, and they
wanted to have this song,
and they made one change, though. They translated the words from
English into Spanish,
and when they translated these words, they made some interesting, I
would say interesting, artistic
choices. What was a song about death? Became a song about finding the
right person and falling in love.
What was a song about how fleeting life is became a song about meeting
someone that makes you feel
special, which is nice. But completely different from the meaning of
the tune, completely different,
but if you heard it and if you don't know Spanish and you just listen
to the song, you would hear
down to the same consonants. It sounds like an exact replica of dust
in the wind. And when we hear
the story of John the Baptist in the desert, when we hear Mark quoting
Isaiah, when we have all this
language about Christ returning in clouds and all this advent stuff,
we are tempted to do what
Mago de Oz did with dust in the wind. Change the lyrics. Have it fit
nicely with something that might
make us feel a little better. Have it just get on along to Christmas,
get our Christmas celebrations
going. And I get this. I get the impulse that comes with that. But we
would be doing so much
of a disservice to the story of the Bible, to the story of God, a God
who cares so much for people,
people like us if we did that. We would miss the God breaking into our
world and offering us
real life, true life, new life. And if we resist this urge to tidy up
the text, if we resist
this desire to lessen the force of what we read, we stand in some ways
in front of a great big
blue storm that's bearing down on us, threatening to change our world
in ways that we don't expect.
It's a frightening thing to read these gospels and to actually believe

in them.

Even when the first sentence of what I read in Mark tells me in neon sign, blue clouds right in front of me that what I'm reading is the good news of Jesus Christ. I'm still a little hesitant. I'm thankful that the plea from Isaiah and John's preaching is not merely some request to be nice to other people. Prepare the way of the Lord is what we hear and it's not some call to be on your best behavior. Prepare the way of the Lord is a call. It is saying that God has saved you in the past and God will save you in the future and that God cares for you and is coming again and has come again in Jesus Christ. And our reading of this as Christians in Advent is to hear this expectant call that the God who saved the people of Israel and brought them out of Egypt is the same God that raised Jesus Christ from the grave and that God is worthy of trust, worthy of praise and worthy of what little faith were able to muster through the help of Jesus. What we bring to God, what we offer, all of this is held up by our brother and our Savior, Jesus Christ and God delights in what we offer. My prayer is that we know that God is for us that Christ is for us and we will not feel the need to change the lyrics to the song of redemption that we hear echoing in Scripture. Jesus meets us where we are and when we gather around this table he feeds us. He feeds us and sustains us. He has given us the Holy Spirit in baptism. So now knowing that what we hear today, so go now knowing that what we hear today, the news that God, the news is this, that God will continue to hear us. God will continue to break into our world and be on our side and before us and love us. And that Christ at the end of Advent will make all things right on his return and that is truly good news. Amen.