

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**  
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Advent II

**A New Beginning**  
Mark 1:4

Last week Barbara and I traveled to Virginia to spend Thanksgiving with our sons, our daughter-in-law, and her family. When we were ready to travel home we arrived at the airport in Richmond to learn that O'Hare Airport was closed because of heavy snow and high winds. Our flight would be delayed. Three hours later the gate crew announced that O'Hare was open again, but the status of our flight was still in doubt. A little later they informed us that the captain wanted us to board the plane even though clearance to land in Chicago had not yet been given. This seemed like a risky strategy to us. We had visions of a nightmarish scenario of sitting on the tarmac for ten or twelve hours. When we boarded the captain explained that when the window opened in Chicago planes that were already loaded and ready to fly would have a better chance of getting through it. It turned out that the captain knew what he was doing. After 40 minutes on the ground we were cleared to fly to Chicago.

The gospel of Mark offers a similar strategy for traveling with Jesus. The journey begins with John the Baptizer who challenges us to load our planes early. John calls his listeners to prepare in the wilderness for the most important journey in their lives. The wilderness is the place where we are confronted with the unacceptability of the way things are. In the wilderness John preached to a people who suffered under the political tyranny of the Roman Empire. They wanted to restore Israel to the status that it enjoyed under David and Solomon. But they had learned the bitter truth that there was nothing they could do to make this happen. They had become hardened in their cynicism. But John has the audacity to insist that this wilderness which they abhor is the very place to prepare for a new beginning. Here they can repent and turn their lives around. Here they can load their planes and imagine the journey that God has prepared for them.

On our trip to Virginia I was able to spend two days on the Eastern Shore. There I visited sites important to one of the founders of American Presbyterianism, Francis Makemie. Makemie came to the Eastern Shore of Virginia from Ireland in 1683. His experience in America was all about loading the planes early. What he found when he arrived were laws in most colonies which did not permit Presbyterians to organize churches. He dared to imagine a different kind of religious landscape where people would have the freedom to create new worshiping communities. He pursued his vision by traveling throughout the colonies to encourage Presbyterians to practice their faith and to urge government officials to give them the freedom to do so. He became a successful merchant as a way of financing this kind of ministry.

The highlight of my visit was finding in the archives of Accomack County the handwritten entry from 1693 reporting that the court had granted to Makemie permission to preach at his personal residences. He still wasn't free to organize a church in Virginia, but he could load the planes early by preaching the gospel. Some day churches would surely follow.

Makemie was not as well received by government officials in New York. In 1706 he was arrested for preaching in a private home. The governor, Lord Cornbury, had him placed in prison and tried for preaching without a license. When Lord Cornbury failed to secure a conviction against Makemie he wrote to the House of Lords Commissioners in London to describe the incident. He condemned Makemie in these words:

I entreat your Lordships protection against this malicious man, who is well known in Virginia and Maryland to be a disturber of the peace and quiet of all places he comes into. He is a jack of all trades. He is a preacher, a doctor of physic, a merchant, an attorney, a counselor-at-law, and, which is worst of all, a disturber of governments (Richard S. Uhrbrock, *The Colonial Genealogist*, Volume VIII, Number 3, page 115).

When confronted with the restrictions of the wilderness, Makemie dared to imagine a different kind of world. He was indeed a disturber who believed that God would provide a new beginning.

Isaiah 40 describes a prophet who dared to dream of a new beginning. The prophet is given the task of announcing good news to the people of Israel who have lived for several generations in Babylonian exile. The Jewish exiles were in a truly hopeless situation. They understood the truth that they had no way of getting home. They lacked the political clout to convince the Babylonians to let them return. Even if they could get permission to leave, they did not have the resources to make the long and dangerous journey across forbidding terrain.

The prophet challenges the people to see their wilderness in a different way. It need not be a place of despair. It is a place where they can meet God who is preparing them for a new beginning. It is the place where they can load their planes early. The prophet invites them to imagine something they have never seen before. He describes a highway through the wilderness. Every valley is lifted up. Every mountain and hill is made low. God will remove every obstacle to redeem his people. They are called to imagine a different kind of future.

What it means to dream in the wilderness has been demonstrated in the life of a contemporary church leader in Africa. Devison Banda is the president of the Justo Mwale Theological College in Zambia's capital city, Lusaka. The seminary serves the fast growing Presbyterian and Reformed churches in that part of Africa. Banda grew up very poor, but someone noticed that he was a gifted student and helped him get a college and seminary education.

He began his career as the pastor of a small church in a village where the people were very poor. They could not afford to do what American congregations often do in providing a pantry shower for new pastors. Banda, his wife, and two small children arrived with a little money and a little bit of food. When this money and food ran out all they had left was what they called "mealy meal," a local corn meal from which they could make something like grits.

One morning the family sat down together for their daily prayers. Devison Banda remembers his prayer for food, "Lord, you passed us by yesterday, but in your providence don't pass us by again today, yet in all things may your name be praised." The day went by and no food came. The next morning he prayed again, "Lord, you passed us by again, but surely you stopped by someone else's house; but in your providence, don't pass us by again, yet in all things may your name be praised." Once again, no help came that day. But on the third day they offered their prayer again and food came (Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Journal For Preachers*, Advent 2008, pages 13-14).

That is the Advent prayer of all who dare to believe that God is preparing us for a new beginning.