

December 10, Advent 2B (Mark 1:1-8)

In Flint, we know something about nostalgia and despair—and hope.

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [November 8, 2017](#) issue

Stillwater, Minnesota, is known for its antique stores. People from Minneapolis–St. Paul love to visit this old river town 20 miles east and spend a weekend browsing in the stores. My husband and I used to love one store in particular because it had automobile magazine ads from the 1940s to the 1980s. We are both car guys, and we could sit for a long time looking at these ads. They gave us a glimpse into an era we had no memory of at all.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing in our culture. A few years ago, I was the associate pastor of a church in Minneapolis that was moving into a new building with two other churches. In our preparations for the move, we dug up a lot of old stuff. Looking at bulletins from the 1950s gave a different picture of the congregation. In those days, the sanctuary was full at two services. I remember reading somewhere that the Sunday school classes had hundreds of kids. After reading something like this you notice how the feeling of nostalgia slides a bit into despair and sadness. The sanctuary was now sprinkled with 80 or so people. The Sunday school had just a few children.

I know that feeling of loss. When your hometown is Flint, Michigan, you live with nostalgia. You can remember when the city was near 200,000 people and when General Motors had 80,000 workers in the metro area. You can remember when the city was dotted with auto factories, and we saw trucks full of Buicks heading out to places around the country. Now that Flint is a city of 100,000 with large fields where factories used to be, you feel that sense of despair. Nostalgia is both a longing for security and a driver of pain.

Mark 1 lifts verses 2 and 3 from Isaiah 40, a passage of hope in the midst of despair. This part of Isaiah was written at a time when most of the Israelites were off in captivity in Babylon. Their homeland was no more; foreign armies had destroyed it.

Now they were in a strange land to serve their new conquerors. Not good times.

Seemingly out of nowhere comes this unnamed prophet who says that God will comfort God's people. The prophet shouts that God is coming and it's time to get ready. Mountains will be made plain, valleys will be filled up, and the Israelites are to tell the whole world that God is here. God has not forgotten God's people—even if they have forgotten God.

I've always considered Mark the oddball Gospel because it begins and ends so abruptly. There is no ramping up or winding down to the story, it just starts with this guy named John who lives in the desert eating bugs and wearing uncomfortable clothing. He tells people that the promised one is coming and calls on them to be baptized—a sign of the renewal taking place in their hearts. John cites Isaiah 40 to say that Jesus is coming, so get ready.

And the odd thing is that people take John's word seriously. They pour out of the cities into the middle of nowhere to be baptized. Israel is again under foreign control, and the religious leadership is in some cases fraternizing with the Roman government. The people find hope in John's message. God has not left them; hope is on the way.

Advent is about hope, not just waiting. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is a cry for salvation, a pleading for God to come and save us and a belief that we can rejoice because liberation is just around the corner. We look at how things used to be, the old glory days, and wonder if God has left us. Isaiah and Mark remind us that God is bringing down mountains and lifting up valleys. God is always there and always faithful.

This story of decline and loss is not the only story about Flint. There is another story that grows up right alongside it. A few years ago, my husband and I walked down Saginaw Street, the main drag downtown. Since the early '80s, downtown Flint wasn't a place you really went to unless you had business to do. But as I walked, I saw a number of cafes with outdoor seating. The area seemed to be buzzing with activity. We could walk over to the farmers' market's new downtown digs. The state university continues to grow, bringing in students not only from Flint but from around the world. Another university has bought up property nearby and is working at beautifying the area. A new park is rising where an old Chevy factory once stood. A new Flint is rising from the ashes.

Mountains come down. Valleys are raised. A city gets a new lease on life. Prepare the way of the Lord; salvation is on the way.