

Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2023

St. Mark 1:1-8

“It’s What God Ordered”

- I. Beginnings
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St. Mark 1:1-8

Dear Friends in Christ,

You might remember the story about a laid-back fellow who stopped by his neighbor's home to tell them that their son was stuck in a mud hole. "How deep is he sunk?" asked the boy's father. "About to his ankles," said the fellow. "Well," said the father, "Only up to his ankles? We've got time to sit and talk." "I don't think so," said the laid back fellow. "He's in head first!"

I know, it's a goofy story, but sometimes life gets that way - like now - right? Goofy, upside down, deep in the mud? It's best we hold on to what Jesus said: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Mt.10:29-31)." Paul wrote of the Lord: "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col.1:17)." This Second Sunday of Advent we're to consider. . .

IT'S WHAT GOD ORDERED

I. Beginnings

I'm calling this part of the sermon "Beginnings." St. Mark's Gospel begins with, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This is one of a number of most important beginnings. The first is recorded in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." And the beginning we look forward to is the moment we enter eternal life, the beginning that has no end.

Again, Mark tells us that his writing is "the gospel (the Good News) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Jesus, His name meaning the one who saves, is the Christ, that is the anointed One, the One set apart to win our forgiveness of sin and eternal life; to save us from the wages sin: death and hell.

And we remember that the Gospel of St Matthew begins with, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Mt.1:9)." Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus back to David, who was a type of Christ. David was a descendent of Abraham who believed the Lord's promise of a coming Savior. The Word says, "(Abraham) believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Gen.15:6)." - sinlessness.

And we remember that the Gospel of St. John begins with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word (Jesus) was God (Jn.1:1)." You see, the Christian Bible isn't a fairy tale. It is the written Word of God that moves through some 1500 years in which many of the writers God used did not know each other. The only fairy tale is the one created by those who can't stand the words, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rm.3:23). Mark goes on to write . . .

II. The Essence of Advent

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight (vv.2,3)'"

This second Sunday of Advent we're looking at the last Old Testament prophet we know as John the Baptist, sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus' First Coming. As Zechariah, the father of John, said at the time of John's birth, "And you child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins (Lk. 1:76,77)." He was sent, not to make the world feel better about itself, but to call it to repentance and to the coming Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I guess it might be a surprise to some, but Advent is not all about the excitement for a great Christmas, unless you understand the mission of John. We sang about the mission in our sermon hymn; "Then cleansed be every life from sin;/ Make straight the way for God within,/ And let us all our hearts prepare/ For Christ to come and enter there."

John's message is not a morbid groveling in self-defeat. It is not a fluffy, rose colored life in a world distorted by sin and death. I know the positive thinkers cringe at those words. Do I really need to remind us of this world's mess and where it's headed? In our text, St. Mark comforts tells us, "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism for the repentance of sins (v.4)." Then we're told:

And all the country of Judea and Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sin. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie (vv.5-7)."

John is the great messenger of Advent. John's clothing of camel's hair and a leather belt and his diet of locusts and wild honey are reminders that our walk to the Manger is to witness the birth of the One who redeemed us from sin and death for eternal life. It's the call to understand God's Word that promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I Jn.1:9)." Life couldn't be any more positive!

III. And This.

And this: In our text John said, "I have baptized you water, but he (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (v.8)." Before His ascension into heaven, in Acts 1:5, Jesus explained John's words: "For John baptized you with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." On the first Pentecost, what John prophesied and Jesus promised were fulfilled for us in these ever so familiar words of the Apostle Peter:

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins (the baptisms in the name of Jesus is the baptism He commanded; to be baptized with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins), and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (the gift of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit who works and sustains faith through the Word). For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off (the distant generations), everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself (Acts 2:28,29)."

The Holy Spirit has always been with God's people. He was there working faith through John's baptism. At Pentecost the empowering work of the Holy Spirit would dramatically, explosively move the church in a powerful way; to go into all the world with the Good News of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ!

James S. Hewett tells this incident:

"One evening a woman was driving home when she noticed a huge truck behind her that was driving uncomfortably close. She stepped on the gas to gain some distance from the truck, but when she sped up the truck did too. The faster she drove, the faster drove the truck.

"Now scared, she exited the freeway. But the truck stayed with her. The woman then turned up a main street, hoping to lose her pursuer in traffic. But the truck ran a red light and continued the chase.

"Reaching the point of panic, the woman whipped her car into a service station and bolted out of (the car) screaming for help. The truck driver sprang from his truck and ran toward the car. Yanking the back door open, the driver pulled out a man hidden in the back seat.

“The woman was running from the wrong person. From his high vantage point, the truck driver spotted a would-be rapist in the woman’s car. The chase was not his effort to harm her but to save her even at the cost of own safety.”

In the same way, many run away from God’s provision for forgiveness of sin and eternal life; the blood of Jesus. The Manger is inviting, but the Cross is too much for it demands that humans face the truth about themselves - their sin. From His high vantage point God sees and in Christ runs after us.

Decorations and celebrations for the birth of Christ are quite appropriate, yet the message of repentance and forgiveness of Christ isn’t all pleasantries. The Lord speaks from the Proverbs: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy (Prov. 29:13).” That’s the prosperity: mercy! Jesus said, “...I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Lk.15:10).” The decorations and celebrations remind us of the eternally divine peace, joy, happiness that await the repentant heart when we stand face to face with God.

W.M. Taylor wrote, “True repentance hates the sin, and not merely the penalty; and it hates the sin most of all because it has discovered and felt God’s love.” Thank God for John’s message. Thank God for Jesus. It is just what God ordered . . . what is needed for you...for me...for eternal life!

Amen

Pastor Bill