

“The Beginning of the Good News”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 29, 2019

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Psalm 91:1-2, 9-12

Mark 1:1-15

Mark’s gospel is typically not read during the Advent and Christmas seasons because it skips over the story of the birth of Jesus, and his childhood; and instead jumps right in where he is already a grown man. Jesus’ life does not begin the day he was baptized by John, but that is where Mark begins his story; without a manger or shepherds or magi. This, we are told in the first verse, is the beginning of the good news.

You may be used to hearing portions of this passage either during Advent – when John the Baptist prepares the way for the coming of the Lord; or after the New Year – when we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River. But the beginning of the good news might also be a good topic to consider near the end of one calendar year and the beginning of a new year (and new decade); to think about what we might want to take on in this new year and what we may want to leave behind in the old one.

You may remember, from our Advent readings, that the mothers of John and Jesus – Elizabeth and Mary – were cousins; and spent time with each other while both were expecting. When John was born, his parents – instead of naming him after his father Zechariah – did what the angel Gabriel instructed and named him John, which means “God is gracious” or “favored by God.”¹ But when we meet John, here, he is hardly acting in a gracious way; John is out in the wilderness, demanding that the people coming out to him repent; that they turn toward God and transform their lives.

John’s odd dress and unusual diet of locusts and honey likely point to his membership in the desert community of Qumran. His lifestyle appears consistent with someone living in the wilderness and characterized by poverty, likely voluntary poverty. In a culture where poverty was a source of embarrassment and shame, John seems to embrace it as a part of his identity; wearing it proudly on his sleeve.

Mark says that in the wilderness, John was preaching a baptism of repentance and that the residents of the Judean countryside and Jerusalem voluntarily went out to see him. Mark’s point seems to be that the message of repentance was directed at

¹ Alyce McKensie, “Turnaround”

those who enjoyed fairly comfortable standards of living, residing in an island of wealth surrounded by a sea of poverty. Surprisingly, though, many were responding positively to John's invitation.²

What did it mean for the people of Jerusalem to repent and be baptized in the wilderness? The Greek word *metanoia* which is often translated as "repentance" carries the connotation of having your perception of the world, and your place in it, transformed; adopting a radically different perspective and way of relating to others.

Metanoia can also mean changing course; turning around. In John's context, it would have meant not accepting the status quo and rejecting the current socio-economic conditions. In Luke's gospel, John is even more explicit: demanding that those who have two coats should give up one; that those who have enough food should share it with those who do not have enough.

John is inviting people in the wilderness to reflect on the culture of consumption in which they are participants and to consider the cost of such a lifestyle on those many others who live in poverty. It is a moment of moral reckoning and transformation that will prepare the people to take part in the way of the Lord.

John is in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance; Jesus is baptized by John and then immediately goes into the wilderness before proclaiming his own message of *metanoia* – or transformation – for those who would leave their jobs and families to become his followers.

Thus, at the beginning of the good news, both John and Jesus remind us that in order to be followers on the path God sets before us, we need to consider what we may want to take on; as well as what might need to leave behind. Are we holding on to material things too tightly, things that we could be sharing but are afraid to let go of? Are we in need of some change of direction; in our spiritual life or in some relationship we share? Is it time to take on a new ritual to help us grow; or to let go of some habit that is holding us back?

When Jesus is baptized by John, Mark described the heavens being torn apart. It's the same word that Matthew, Mark and Luke all use to describe the moment on Good Friday when the curtain of the Temple is torn in two; the same word that John uses when the Roman soldiers decide, at the foot of the cross, not to tear Jesus' garment and divide it between them, but instead to cast lots for it. It's a word used by the prophet Isaiah who says to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." (Isaiah 63:19)³

² Raj Nadella from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Maxwell Grant, "Torn Open, by God" from *Day1.org*

Mark understands that in Jesus – the one who comes in the wake of John’s calling the people to *metanoia*, to turning around – this is exactly what happened: God has torn open the heavens and come down to be among us, with us, and one of us. But if God has torn open the heavens and broken into our lives, then what ensues is something not necessarily easier, but definitely and radically more urgent.

As Jesus is baptized by John and God tears through the heavens, we are similarly called to tear into the challenges and problems of the world. We are summoned to take part in the remarkable, redemptive work of God; to give our lives to something that is potentially more challenging than any other kind of work – and, also, more beautiful, true and enduring.

At the beginning of the good news, this work is called repentance, *metanoia*, a change of direction. Have you ever experienced this kind of turnaround? It can come when somebody cares enough about us to tell us the raw truth about ourselves; that we need to change. That may be the definition of a genuine friend: somebody who, like John in the wilderness, is willing to tell us the difficult truth.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever had a friend, or maybe a family member or a spouse that cared enough about you to tell you a hard truth about yourself? Did it happen through a story you heard, or an article or scripture you read? It has happened to me; and when I heard it, I was able to understand that I had become locked in a cycle of self-pity or narrow perspective or over-indulgence. And when it happened to me, I understood that the time had come to turn around, to make a change; to either take up something new or leave something else behind.

John the baptizer is like that friend who dares to tell us the truth about ourselves. There are many types of situations that might require repentance. One of them is the sin of becoming so preoccupied with outward details that we forget the inward meaning of our actions. This was the sin of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day with their many rituals – believing that going through the motions would bring the joy of genuine relationship with God. But another sin is the belief that while our thoughts or intentions matter, our actions do not. John, like Jesus after him, made it clear that we are called to be followers not only in word, but also in deed; to share of what we have been given; to be the hands and feet of God.

The close of one year, and the beginning of another, might be the time when we need to turn around, to repent, to change course. As I write about in the upcoming church newsletter, I am committing in 2020 to two daily rituals: reading the entire Bible in a year and praying the Daily Office of the Northumbria Community. These resolutions are not ends, but the means; they by themselves are not the difficult work of reconciliation and transformation and bearing witness of hope and peace that I hope

will be the fruit, these are simply two ways of stimulating and listening to the necessary *metanoia*. I invite you to join me and commit to these particular practices as a way of stimulating a turnaround, but you may choose your own. That is fine, too.

The point is that we – given the state of our world, its division and unrest – are in need of transformation. We need repentance. Because, if we don't turn around, we may not recognize who is coming. If we don't change direction, we won't see Jesus wading into the water with the rest of us sinners and bowing his head to be baptized by John. We won't witness the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus. If we do not listen to John's call to repentance, we may not see how God is calling us into the difficult work of serving neighbors and welcoming strangers and loving even our enemies.

The beginning of the good news is an appropriate place for us to focus upon at the dawn of a new year. Is this going to be a year when we turn around and commit time and energy to our relationship with God? Will this be a year when we pray for peace and work for justice? Is this a year when we recognize what we have to share and offer it to those who are in need? Can this be a year when divisions are bridged?

This is the beginning of the good news. I invite you to believe it, and to take part in the upcoming journey of hearing, seeing and living it out. Amen.