

Sunday, December 10, 2023

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1019255099288583>

(Sermon begins at about 18:50)

“Being Made New”

During the season of Advent, we look at the ways Jesus Christ is manifest in our lives. Through his First Coming at his birth in Bethlehem. Through his Second Coming at the end of the ages. And at every point in between. But what does that actually mean? To the early Christians, our reading from the Gospel according to Mark would have given them the answer. It can give us the answer, too, if we just know how to decipher it.

Today we hear the opening verses of Mark’s Gospel, which serves as a prologue to the entire document. In ancient writings, the prologue provided a summary of what followed, providing some basic knowledge of what is to come. While we may be accustomed to uncertainty and even a little suspense as to where a particular text will lead us, the ancients viewed the ambiguity of the unknown as a distraction. It was thought that if the reader or hearer did not have a clear idea of where the text was going, their mind would wander, potentially missing the intended message. So, prologues gave the audience a roadmap, letting them know what to expect so they could better focus on the intended message. Although, the roadmap, as in the case of the prologue to Mark’s Gospel, might be a bit cryptic itself, shrouded in imagery that may only be readily discernable to the initiated.

In what we hear today, Jesus is only mentioned once, in the opening sentence: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The rest of today’s passage focuses on John the Baptist and on the set-up for Jesus’ baptism. Despite only referencing Jesus once, despite focusing on John the Baptist, the verses presented today speak volumes about who Jesus is—if we know how to interpret the images presented; if we know how to break the code, as it were. These images giving us a clear idea of just how the early Church viewed Jesus. And providing us, as we continue our Advent journey, with an overview of who Jesus is in our lives of faith.

So, let’s break the code, shall we? The key to this is found in the Hebrew Scriptures—what we know as the Old Testament. We have to remember that the Jews of Jesus’ time were generally well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. For them, religion and their faith were an integral part of their daily lives, of who they were. As such, they would have recognized the biblical images being presented and would have been able to interpret their broader meaning. Not unlike how, for us, the mere reference to Bethlehem calls to mind the entirety of the birth narrative: Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, where they are unable to find a room in an inn; their finding shelter in a stable; Mary giving birth to Jesus in a manger, surrounded by animals; the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem being greeting by a choir of angels announcing the birth of the Messiah; and so on.

The first key image in the prologue to Mark's Gospel is in the first two words: "The beginning." Obviously indicating that what follows is the beginning of the story of Jesus. But to the ancients, these words would have called to mind something more: the creation story in Genesis, which starts with "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . ." These words from Genesis evoking the image of God's creation of all that is. To those hearing the prologue to Mark's Gospel, starting as it does with "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," they would have recognized that in the person of Jesus Christ—himself the Son of God, God in the flesh—God is creating something new. Through Jesus, God is re-creating, remaking the world. Providing a way to correct for the sinfulness of the first humans. Jesus, as he is referred to elsewhere in the New Testament, being the New Adam, establishing a new age for humanity.

Many of the other images presented in the prologue to Mark's Gospel similarly focus on this general theme of something new being accomplished with the advent of Jesus. What immediately follows is: "As it is written in the prophet Isaiah," providing an indication that Jesus is the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. These prophecies foretelling the coming of the Messiah who will make all things new and usher in a new age. Since the coming of the Messiah was a fervent hope of the Jewish people, and particularly for those around the time of Jesus, this reference to prophecy could only mean one thing: that Jesus is the one they have been waiting for; that Jesus is the Messiah.

Mark then allegedly quotes the prophet Isaiah:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

I say allegedly because, truth be told, Mark's reference to the prophet Isaiah is not entirely accurate. While containing a verse—or rather a paraphrase of a verse—from our Old Testament reading from Isaiah chapter 40, the entire text Mark cites is actually a mash-up of verses from three different Old Testament books: Exodus, Isaiah, and Malachi. Fear not. I am not going to geek out and dissect every specific passage and reference back to the Old Testament. While maybe an interesting exercise for Bible Study, it would be overkill for our purposes. And frankly, the original hearers probably wouldn't have gotten that granular in their analysis either. What is of importance is really the primary images presented in Mark's prologue and what is being referenced in Old Testament texts.

Mark's referring to the wilderness would have certainly called to mind the Exodus—the forty years the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness, fleeing slavery in Egypt, and traveling to the Promised Land, guided by God. To the original hearers of Mark's Gospel, this image would have sent the message that under Jesus' leadership, they will be led out of captivity into a new life, to a new promised land. This side of the resurrection, we recognize this as Jesus breaking the bonds of sin and death, ending our captivity to sin and death, and leading us to the new promised land that is characterized by forgiveness and new and eternal life in him.

The reference to Isaiah and particularly the words “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” are an explicit reference to the Old Testament passage we heard today. In the oracle we heard today—in the image that would have come to mind for the hearers of Mark’s prologue—God is announcing to those in exile in Babylon that the Exile is coming to an end, that they will be returning home to Israel. In this oracle, God uses the image of a wilderness highway being prepared for the exiled Israelites to use to travel home. A promise that their restoration, of their return home across the wilderness separating Babylon and Israel, will be an easy one. Unlike the difficulties of the forty years in the wilderness experienced by their ancestors. This image of a highway being prepared to take the people back home is a message to the hearers of Mark’s prologue that Jesus has come to take God’s people to their true home. This side of the resurrection, we recognize this being an image for us being taken to our true and eternal home in God’s heavenly realm. The promise of new and eternal life that is accomplished through Christ’s death and resurrection.

And then the images from Malachi, focusing on a messenger sent to prepare the way, would have called to mind prophecies of God’s imminent arrival. Indicating that Jesus, as the Son of God, God in the flesh, has arrived among the people to accomplish all that has been foretold regarding the Messiah. All that had been foretold, all that had been promised, was no longer a far-off hope and dream, but a soon-to-be-accomplished reality in the person of Jesus.

All this is before we even get to John the Baptist and all that he represents as the messenger proclaiming the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. We could do a whole other sermon just on the imagery presented in the last five verses of today’s Gospel reading. But for our purposes, what is most important in providing insight about Jesus is John’s proclamation, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me . . . I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Baptism was a Jewish rite of purification. A sacramental act of being cleansed of sin and ritual impurity. An act that, unlike our Christian tradition, could be repeated as necessary. But baptism was also used as a rite of initiation for new converts to Judaism. In this, similar to our own understanding of the rite, baptism is an image for incorporation into the family God.

John references the baptism he has performed using water, noting that the one who is to come will not only baptize with water, but also with the Holy Spirit. John’s references to water and Spirit would have called to the minds of his hearers the image of another prophet, Ezekiel. In one of his oracles, Ezekiel references both water and the spirit as an image for God’s promise to renew his people, that they will be cleansed of their sins. And in the process, they will be given a new heart and a new spirit—God’s spirit, which will transform them and truly make them God’s people. In our Christian tradition, we recognize that baptism includes both water and the invocation of the Holy Spirit as a means of cleansing us of our sins and transforming us into members of the Body of Christ.

Without even mentioning Jesus—other than in the introductory sentence—and while focusing entirely on John the Baptist, the imagery presented in Mark’s prologue succeeds in painting a pretty thorough picture of who Jesus is for us and why he came into the world. In his Gospel, Mark presents Jesus Christ as the One who has come to usher in a new creation, a new exodus,

and a new restoration of God's people. All accomplished through his life and ministry and through his death and resurrection. Which we participate in through the sacrament of baptism, whereby we are transformed and incorporated into the Body of Christ. Whereby we are cleansed and assured of new and eternal life in him.

In the season of Advent, we look at the ways Jesus Christ is manifest in our lives. Through his First Coming at his birth in Bethlehem. Through his Second Coming at the end of the ages. And at every point in between. As his Body, Christ is continually manifest in our day-to-day lives. As Mark points out, in Christ, we are a new creation, refreshed and renewed through our baptisms and through his resurrection; and in him we find our true home. With that certainty, may we, like Isaiah, like John the Baptist, likewise be voices crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.

Guidance in interpretation of imagery in the Prologue of the Gospel according to Mark's provided by "Prince of Peace: SALT's Commentary for Second Sunday of Advent," SALT, December 4, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2017/12/4/lectionary-commentary-advent-week-two>.