

Sunday, December 10, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Reclaiming Hope Through Divine Peace

INTRODUCTION:

If you were here last Sunday, you may remember our Gospel reading was an unexpected, if not down right strange way to begin Advent. We did not start the season of Advent with angelic visions appearing to young Mary but rather a reading from chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel. It is a foreboding and dark passage. Jesus comes across more like an angry-prophet than a grace-dispensing teacher. He warns us of the severe and difficult days that are surly coming. He describes a fearful and confusing time of widespread suffering, a time when cataclysmic natural disasters will claim massive losses. Numerous violent wars erupt; people turn aggressively on one another and religious persecution is a common occurrence. It kind of felt to me like he was pretty much describing 2017! Thankfully though Jesus comforts his disciples (and certainly me) by assuring us that all of this is a sign that God is on the move and will, in the end, bring about a new order from the chaos of a world gone mad. Today we flash back to the very beginning of Mark's Gospel. It's kind of like that old filmmaking technique of starting the movie with a big shocking scene then suddenly smash cutting to a title card on the screen that reads, "3 years earlier..."

Mark chose to start his story just prior to Jesus appearing on the scene. He completely skips over the birth narrative. It's okay because he brilliantly sets the stage, especially for the first century hearers of this crisp, journalistic-like account about the life of Jesus. You see, the Jewish people hearing these words would have easily picked up on familiar vernacular and Scriptural themes that we might easily miss today. Mark begins by reframing the familiar and sacred story. An oppressed and beleaguered people suffer under the brutal tyranny of a cold-hearted empire. It's Egyptian bondage all over again. And just like in the days of Moses and Pharaoh, God is about to intervene and will rescue the righteous and liberate the captives. Deliverance is at hand and a new day of freedom is breaking on the horizon.

In these first 8 verses, Mark boldly asserts the startling claim that Jesus is unquestionably the fulfillment of God's promised salvation. He invokes famous old prophets who call for repentance; he references the well-known theme of wandering in the wilderness, and tells of a familiar water ritual, known to his audience as a precursor to God's forgiveness and redemption.

Let's begin by listening to the Gospel of Mark, chapter one, verses 1 through 8. Listen carefully for words or phrases that echo familiar themes you might remember from the Hebrew Scripture.



The *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.”

In the *wilderness* John - the baptizer began preaching a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins.

People from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem were going out
to him, and he was baptizing them in the Jordan River as they confessed their
sins.

John wore a garment made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist,
and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed,

“One more powerful than I am is coming after me; I am not worthy to bend
down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with **water**, but **he** will
baptize you with the **Holy Spirit**.”



At the time Mark wrote these words, The Roman army had just obliterated the
Holy Jewish temple as punishment for an attempted a military revolt against
imperial occupation. The Jewish insurgency was quickly and soundly destroyed.
It was a foolish thing to even imagine a militaristic solution would be viable
against the most efficient and powerful war machine the world had ever known.
Once again the Hebrew people were a defeated and depleted tribe, struggling to
hold onto their identity. Hope had been crushed under the iron hand of a cruel
oppressor. It must have felt like the insatiable appetite of wickedness and evil
had swallowed up every morsel of goodness and light. Had God simply withdrawn
from the earth, disgusted by what humanity had become?

I have to admit; I can relate. These past weeks I open my news feed with a sick
feeling of impending revulsion. Who will we discover is a monster today? What
#metoo story will break my heart and leave me feeling somehow culpable and
ashamed to be a cisgendered white male. How can it be that I am identified with
the exact same religious label as those who dismiss predatory behavior and
sexual exploitation to advance political ideology over common decency? Everyday
I am more and more astonished at how quickly the integrity of our societal fabric

is unraveling. Day by day, hour-by-hour it seems like our moral grounding is steadily eroding in a toxic tsunami of deception, calculated misdirection and complete disregard for the common good. Seriously, most days I'm utterly flabbergasted by what my government is doing. Preaching about the coming of the Prince of Peace in times like these often feels like weak sentimentality and the wishful thinking of a fool. How do I reconcile the Good News of God's love and care for all people even as unjust laws are routinely legislated and a fragile and tense world is goaded into violent response? Sometimes I feel so powerless to do anything that will stop this runaway train that clearly seems destined to soon derail.

I stared a long time at this scripture this week. I thought a lot about how we light candles in defiance of the increasing darkness. I honestly questioned if I am able to truly anticipate the coming of a better day. I remembered the dark prophecy from Mark 13 and how Jesus said that this was the indicator that God was on the move, bringing Justice and liberation. I remembered how Mark wrote to people in a similar frame of mind. I looked at the prophesy in Isaiah that Mark refers to. Connections began to take shape in my mind. These stories helped me realized what you probably already know. It will never be in my power or ability to stop a runaway train. But what exactly is in my power and ability? How am I to respond to what is happening in this world?

Let's listen to this prophesy from Isaiah and see if there's any insight in those words. This is what God is saying to a defeated and exiled people. Hear these words from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40.

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?”

“All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.”

You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

What I noticed this week in my angst, heartbreak, outrage and negativity is that I had slipped into this absurd idea that it was up to me to stop the train, to turn the tide, to become the hero of my own story. My frustration rose from feeling inadequate, powerless and voiceless in the face of such madness. Frustration was blinding me from seeing another reality. As wild and off balance our world is, the fact is that it's always been struggling in this very same battle. The Biblical narrative, I discovered this week, reveals a distinct and clear pattern, a continual cycle rolling throughout history. It's the magnificence of the creation story, the hard won reversal in the exodus story, the prophet's call for repentance and most certainly the Gospel story of life, death and resurrection. In the center of all this drama, is the steadfast love of God for humanity to survive and live in goodness. No matter how awful things get, God's mercy is inexhaustible and always available. In contrast, our human response is reliably inconsistent, fickle, completely conditional and predictably undependable. No matter what great intentions we have or resolved promises make to create a better world we always end up abusing power, oppressing the poor and worshiping flimsy idols. No matter how dedicated we are to succeed in our mission to build a just world, the truth is "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. We are like a summer flowers in July standing beautiful and tall for a time until adversity comes along. The wind blows, the seasons change and we come face to face with our frailty and mortality.

What I learn from these stories is that even though we are temporal, unreliable and imperfect people. God will never give up on us. Scripture gives us these stories that reveal a predictable pattern. There is order, then inevitably disorder followed by a new order. Even nature follows the pattern. So I think the key message is to think beyond the temporality of a season. No tyrant will stand forever. No nation is eternal. No human can save us. It is God who calls us to repentance. It is God who is forever dispensing mercy. It is God who brings justice. My outrage at the White House, and energetic crusade against the immoral acts of the powerful on the weak is a harmful distraction that robs me of hope and steals all sense of peace. I get caught up in ideologies and heroic idealisms that turn me bitter, angry and locked in self-righteous moralistic stance.

Jesus teaches us to recognize our own frailty and inability, to repent from hubris and humble ourselves before a God who only asks us to seek the kingdom of God as we are able. All we need do is the next right thing! Only when I find peace in myself I can bring peace to another. All God wants from us is to do the next right thing and that will be enough.

Together we can seek justice, find peace, foster hope, and live in the joyous wonder that it is always God's reliably that brings about new order from the chaos. It is God who rescues those who turn toward goodness. It is God who inaugurates the restoration of peace and justice; it is God who prepares the new exodus for those lost in the wilderness. All we can do is reclaim our hope in the story of a God who redeems everything and even now is on the move.

People of God, do not be afraid. Through the labor pains of an imperfect world God *will* give birth to a new order. Even now, the Prince of Peace is coming and God is on the move.