

December 10, 2017 • Second Sunday of Advent

“God So Loves the World: Prepare the Way”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Mark 8:1-8

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.” His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.” Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

So...this is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Gospel of Mark. Chapter 1, verse 1. This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. No manger, no angels or shepherds, no star. No birth story. This will be Mark’s story of another kind of birth about a God who breaks into our lives with astonishing certainty and clarity of purpose to deliver us from evil and fill us with new life and love. It’s a story about a new birth within us—for us and our salvation.

When whoever that was, we call him “Mark”, about sixty years after Jesus had died, when he sat down that day with parchment and quill to write, to capture people’s attention and imagination, to get them involved in the story, to get them engaged in what for him was clearly a life-changing story of redemption and grace...what words do you use? What’s your headline?

Mark chose these words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Crystal clear. Gripping. Intriguing. The beginning—there’s a lot more to come...good news...might want to pay attention...of Jesus Christ, Son of God...but I thought he was just that carpenter from Nazareth? And so much more! “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God!”

Immediately, Mark continues: “as it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way...” Mark was a genius. He’s pulling it all together in his opening words. He focuses the people’s attention, and then he begins to layer in echoes of their history and their prophets. Genesis: “in the beginning, God created heaven and earth.” Exodus: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.” Malachi: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” Isaiah.

Hey, everyone—I’ve got some really good news for you. Note: Mark doesn’t say: this is the story of Jesus Christ. Or this is the life of Jesus of Nazareth. No, he makes a bold theological proclamation: the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. He’s not being a neutral reporter here, he’s telling us what he believes to be true.

Now in the first century, that Greek word for good news, evangelion, was widely used to refer to any kind of good news people might share with one another. Any kind of good news: family celebrations, special blessings, the wind is dying down, we were able to save these houses,...and so forth...all kinds of good news.

So we know that to Mark’s first readers, his news came with the connotation of something truly “good”, something to be welcomed and desired. And we who now live in such a “bad news” culture should welcome it as well. The good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

So Mark’s portrayal of John the Baptist out there in the wilderness is all about good news for the people. Nothing of the “brood of vipers” kind of stuff that the other evangelists have him say. Simply, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And this news sounded so good, Mark tells us, that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went to John and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. He told them: the one who is coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, with holiness.

Mark wants us to know the good news that the kingdom of heaven is here. Your sins will be forgiven, your brokenness made whole, your weary bones made strong, your aching hearts restored to the fullness of life. You will be lifted up. You—and you---and you--you will be baptized with the astonishing love of God.

So, really, this is a birth story after all. It is the gospel story of our new birth promised from the beginning of time and now beginning anew in the beginning of the so very Good News in Jesus Christ the Son of God. Through Christ, we become a new creation. We become those who carry God’s light and love in an oft-times dark world to people whose hearts are still heavy, whose spirits are broken, whose hope has dimmed. Born anew in Christ, we become the bearers of this great Good

News for those deeply yearning to hear it and believe it and put their faith in it—maybe even some of us sitting here in these pews this morning. For us all, this is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

It's amazing what can happen when we are born to new life through the love of God. Amazing what good news can come. I recently read a story about 50 solar power generators that were sent to Puerto Rico, much of that island still in the dark, as you know, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria's destructive power. What's fascinating and inspiring is where those 50 solar power generators came from: a small United Methodist church in Detroit, Michigan. Listen up—this is the beginning of Good News...

A few years ago, the Cass UMC launched a community outreach service non-profit called Cass Community Social Services to respond to the needs of people in their area in Detroit. One of the ways they work to support people is by employing formerly homeless folks in the work of the agency. It turns out that there are many family connections between Detroit and Puerto Rico—grown kids who left Puerto Rico to come to Detroit in the hope of finding jobs and a new future, leaving aging parents on the island. But some didn't make it, became homeless, and found a new home and new hope through the outreach ministries of Cass.

Through the church agency, some learned how to build solar generators which can be used to power cell phones, computers, fans, lights and even small refrigerators. Through their family connections and through the connection of the United Methodist Church, their pastor connected with our bishop in Puerto Rico, Bishop Hector Ortiz. The Bishop talked with the District Superintendents who selected the areas and individuals who would receive the generators in their churches and homes, based on health, age and critical need. Their pastor, Rev. Faith Fowler said, "It's a great example of the United Methodist global connection at work in meeting needs both here and in Puerto Rico. More generators will be built as funds are available."

Last month, in November, the pastor at Cass UMC and a couple folks traveled to Puerto Rico to deliver and install 50 solar power generators to bring light to their darkness and hope to their hearts.

The beginning of the Good News in Jesus Christ the Son of God: We become those who carry God's light and love in an oft-times dark world to people whose hearts are still heavy, whose spirits are broken, whose hope has dimmed. Born anew in Christ, we become the bearers of this great Good News for those deeply yearning to hear it and believe it and put their faith in it.

You know, last Saturday, just in time for the beginning of Advent and our Christmas Concert, our faithful crew put up our annual crèche out in the courtyard. After worship last Sunday, our wonderful custodian, Javier, sought me out. "Mrs. Patricia," he said, showing some concern, "Mrs. Patricia—the baby Jesús needs lights. The baby Jesús needs lights!" I whole-heartedly agreed, especially this year. So Javier put up the lights in the stable. And everyone who walks or drives by after dark sees the Christmas lights glowing over the manger, bringing light and good cheer and glimmers of hope to all passers-by.

The baby Jesús needs lights. And we are to be those lights, preparing the way. We are to be the ones who—by everything we do and say, by who we are, by the light shining from deep within us—we are to be the ones who witness to the world God's coming reign of peace and justice. We, who are even now being made new in Christ Jesus, we are to be light and hope and love to all we meet.

This is the beginning of the Good News in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Let us prepare the way.

Amen.

Notes:

JOHN E. HARNISH

Michigan Area Communications, Nov. 21, 2017.

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