

To Be Continued

The neverending story of GOD

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Texts: *Mark 1:1-8*

Advent 2 B | December 7, 2014

The Beginning

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This gospel, given to us by the writer we call Mark, opens with a declaration of beginning. It does not say *this is the beginning*, for it is not the only beginning of the gospel. Nor is it the only way to enter into the gospel. The evangelist doesn't want us to mistake his writing for the gospel itself. He is pointing us toward the gospel, the good news.

And so we gather to hear the gospel with new eyes, in this new liturgical year, brought to us with great anticipation in Advent. It is appropriate that we return now to the beginning.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. it begins. The beginning of the good news. And what does the good news center on? Jesus. But the evangelist doesn't simply call him Jesus. He doesn't begin with Jesus of Nazareth, the more common name for Jesus in his historical context. Not *Jesus the Nazarene*. He is already declared by the evangelist, before we are past the first sentence in this gospel that Jesus is the Christ: the Messiah, the one spoken of.

And then the final clause; we cannot forget that: *the Son of God*.

The evangelist has given us an introduction that tells us what we are about to read, who we are about to meet, and the very stakes of the conversation. This is not about about a new leader or another prophet. This story is about the coming of the Son of God.

And we start at the beginning. This is good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But in the story, the Son has not yet arrived. The story begins before the good news is realized.

Or perhaps, realized by all but a few.

Our Misunderstanding

We begin the year with John the Baptizer, this prophet who proclaims the coming Christ. We don't get to see Jesus yet. In this telling, John is not a cousin, nor are we waiting for the baby to be born. Here we are waiting for the Christ to come.

And the story begins with John and his prophetic message of repentance. And it begins with the large crowds of people, coming out to the Jordan to be baptized. We are instantly reminded that these people have come, not to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They have come to hear the message that this prophet is proclaiming. They aren't coming to meet Jesus through a person's preaching, but to find something deeper and much less specific. They are coming

to find the grace of GOD offered by a fiery prophet. They come to John to receive grace and John offers them some. But he tells them that more will come from the one who comes after him.

Nothing speaks to the confusion of the coming of Christ better than our confusion over this season.

To be accurate, we are at least roughly familiar with the idea that we are not in the Christmas Season yet. The Christmas Season *starts* with Christmas, it doesn't end on Christmas. But I'm not as much a stickler about decorating as I'm taken for. The problem we have in getting this detail wrong is essential to our understanding of what we are indeed preparing for.

The Word Never Left

We read how John the Baptizer quotes 2nd Isaiah about "the one crying out in the wilderness." And when we read the passage from which this is drawn, we hear:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Which all sounds very Jesusy to our ears, doesn't it? But hear it, instead in 2nd Isaiah's context from within the Babylonian Exile. The people were divided and half are pulled from their homes to live a generation in the wilderness of another civilization far from home. These people, who are struggling, do not know where GOD is or if GOD is even around anymore and many have lost hope and are thinking of throwing in the towel and becoming Babylonians. Others are scheming of ways to get back home. And here is the prophet calling out, not to GOD, but to **the people** to ease the suffering. *GOD is saying that our people have suffered enough* she says.

This cry, like the cry we gave last week for GOD to "tear open the heavens" so that GOD can come and help us now. Our people are suffering. Our people in Ferguson and Cleveland and New York and Indianapolis and Terre Haute. We are doing more than waiting, we are calling, we are searching, we are going out into the wilderness to find word of what GOD is doing.

And it is out there that we instead hear back that we bear the cause of one another's suffering, but also the solution. Because we forget that GOD never left us. That when Jesus was born, it didn't mean GOD wasn't with us before and when Jesus ascended, it didn't mean that GOD had left us. GOD came to us as GOD continues to be with us, as GOD promised to come being-there-howsoever-GOD-will-be-there.

This is why we aren't preparing for a birthday of one who has left us, but as a remembering of GOD's sacrifice as a marker of what GOD *always* does; who GOD always is.

To Be Continued

Now, I've just made the mistake of preaching a Christmas sermon in Advent. This is the occupational hazard of a story that is truly only understood as a whole story. That preaching the birth of Christ is only honest when we preach the life of Christ. And the life of Christ is only honest when we preach

the death of Christ. And the death of Christ is only honest when we preach the rebirth, and the ascension, and the apostles, and the Pentecost. And all of that is but a part of the gospel.

The story we tell, what we call the gospel is not a biography of Jesus. There is only one gospel and that is the Word. What we have in the Bible are small bits of the gospel from four different perspectives. And each has a beginning. A beginning that is not about the birth of a hero. But a beginning that reveals again a great relationship between GOD and the people.

It is a story that continues beyond the words on the page and beyond the scope of our lives. A story that involves our ancestors and will involve our descendents. A story of faith and life and trust. A story of doubt and death and deceit. And the one constant, the one most powerful message is that unlike us, GOD keeps promises.

A promise of favor and hope mercy. A promise which comes through repentance.

This second week, we continue with our message of hopeful expectation and with our ongoing cries in the darkness for the coming of the light. Let us also prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. Not specifically in the manger or in the clouds, or any of the specific ways described in Scripture. But in the people we know and in the people we will meet. In the moments of stillness and in raucous parties we throw. In the solemn care we give to gift giving and the thankful effort we give in feeding strangers. Let us be prepared for the coming of Christ in all the ways that Christ will come.

Because the one thing we completely forget about this time of year, every single year is that we are preparing for the arrival of someone who is already here: a houseguest who never left. A Christ who will forgive our sins and be with us in our suffering. A Christ revealing himself on our streets and in our classrooms and in our soup kitchens and in all those places we've been told to find him.

Ours is a dinner party for a guest helping us in the kitchen and being entertained in the den. A guest who isn't a guest, but a friend. A friend who wants to celebrate with us. A friend who is constantly on us to expand the guest list. May we prepare with this spirit of repentance and profound hope.