

December 6, 2020

Light of the World: The Hope of Advent

Shepherd's Grace Church

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

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,"

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1: 1-8)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." <sup>6</sup>A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup>Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" <sup>10</sup>See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense

before him. <sup>11</sup>He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40: 1-11)

Last week, Chance Johnson did an excellent job of conveying to us an underlying point to the Gospel of Mark, the first gospel written and the earliest account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Chance's point is that this gospel is apocalyptic. Now, I do not believe Chance knew that he was making an apocalyptic point, and I am pretty sure he did not use the word. Apocalyptic is the fifty cent word for in-breaking and is frequently used to describe the vision of the end times. It is the time when God will break in to our world and Jesus will return to rule forever and every.

Chance reminded us that we will not know the day or the hour of this event, but that we can be certain of its occurrence. He also reminded us that our current circumstances will not delay its coming but will only serve to remind us that we must stay alert and watch for it. Just like Christmas, even Christmas in the middle of a pandemic, the return is coming.

If Donnie Huffman were singing last week, as part of the service, I am thinking he would have sung, "He'll be returning soon." Soon is a relative term, however and our definition is not the same as the one God uses. If it were, Christ would have returned long ago by our standards. God's apocalyptic approach however is not dependent on time. Time does not exist in eternity so, as Chance pointed out, we just have to wait, to watch, to wonder and...yes, there is a new one we have to remind ourselves in the Advent season; to trust! God will keep God's promises! "Christmas is coming!" (That is another Donnie Huffman song)

In the meantime, today, we begin the good news of the evangelist Mark. We begin at the beginning and even as we do, we marvel at the simplicity of Mark's message. There is no long genealogy as there is in Matthew. There are not two chapters that set up the story of Jesus and his relative John as there is in Luke. There is not the beautiful Christological prose of John to introduce that which was from the beginning. No...Mark just gets right into it!

As evidence, Mark even shortens the creation element from Genesis and from John. Both of these books begin with a three word preface. "In the beginning." Mark shortens his message to just two words. "The Beginning." The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ! His address speaks to us straight away.

Good news is the English translation of the word gospel from the Greek. The beginning brings us good news! Before we hear the good news, however we

should not dismiss the significance of the brevity. Mark wrote these words two thousand years ago, and the people who heard them first heard them just as we hear them today. The very first words out of Mark's mouth as he shared them, or the very first words out of the mouth of the traveling minstrel who spoke them were the same. "The beginning."

You see, back in those days, there were no fancy leather bound books where all the words were written. The tradition of sharing the gospel was largely oral! People who heard Mark traveled from village to village sharing what they heard. It was often a dramatic interpretation of the written and spoken word delivered in a way that would get the attention of the people listening. It was largely shared in exactly the way I shared it with you this morning!

It was shared with the same opening phrase, "The beginning!" While I have made that point a few times in the last few hundred words I have spoken, I do not want it to go unnoticed! Made with clerical brevity, Mark's message is crystal clear. The first two words of his message are always the same. They are and always will be "The Beginning!"

That is because, for Mark, and for all of us, each time we read the good news will always be the beginning. Every day, when we wake and stretch and yawn and slide grudgingly out of bed will be the beginning. Everyday has the potential to be the beginning of the good news. Everyday affords us the opportunity to fall on our knees and give thanks to God for the precious gift of Jesus Christ who is our beginning. It also gives us the opportunity to give thanks because He is our end.

Last week, as the youth hung the Chrismons on the tree, one of them was the symbol for the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. That is the good news, the beginning and the end are ever with us and they are the fulfillment of God's promise, much like the point Chance made to us just last week. Christmas will come and God's fulfillment will be forever at hand.

To extend the point, however is to remind ourselves every day that that day is the beginning, the starting point for us even if we failed yesterday of a place where we can share the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God!

Mark wants us to know with these two words that are written eternally that we are always at the beginning. We always have the opportunity to share the good news and we should never miss the chance!

This year that chance is in the midst of strange circumstances. We face together a global pandemic! We face together the real struggles of separation and alienation. We heard it in our joys and concerns this morning. Our young

people are struggling with remote learning. They learn by observing others and not just by listening or reading. They learn by watching and imitating. It is difficult for them to imitate what they hear or even see on a computer screen. They need to be with others their own age to watch the processes take place in ways similar to the processes they understand. As a result, they are growing increasingly frustrated and their learning is stilted.

Our old people are locked away, isolated from human contact. Many have not seen friends or family for weeks or in some cases months. I would regularly visit no fewer than seven people per week who are in our care homes, but I have not set foot in one of those institutions in months because of the health risk I might be to them or them to me or them to you through me!

These are just a few of the struggles we face this year as we imagine Christmas. Because these struggles are unique to this year, we are having to imagine in an unique way. We are having to think about how we can integrate our current situation into God's reality. We are having to perceive our circumstances in a "new normal."

None of us really likes the term. None of us wants to embrace the term and yet it is inescapable. The "new normal" is our beginning. From this place right where we are, we begin again, just as Mark's congregation began two thousand years ago.

You see, every generation faces new beginnings, "new normal" and new opportunities to choose who they will be in Christ. Mark tells us that every time we open his gospel. We are always faced with "the beginning." Whether it is two thousand years ago or only twelve years ago, or yesterday, it is always the beginning, a chance to share the story in a new way and re-imagine the story with us as a part of it!

Why do I mention twelve years ago? If you were in the sanctuary this morning, you would see a candle that has been on altar for 12 years. It is a candle that was made and presented to our church by Prentice Shew, a young man who was present on that first Sunday, February 1, 2009! It says that on this day, a new church was born.

Twelve years ago, when we were born as a church many of you were here. Many remember that beginning. Many remember the struggles we had coming up with a name. You remember sitting in small groups and offering suggestions and you remember the compromises and concessions that came from those long hours of conversation. You remember the birth of the name and the labor pains of that beginning. You remember that what we did defined not only who we were in that moment but who we would become!

Mark's point this morning is that these beginnings define us every day! They offer us the opportunity in each and every moment we consider our relationship with Jesus Christ to determine who we are and what we will become. Will we be the good news? Will we continue to offer the hope and promise of a future with God? Will we let our circumstances define us or will we remember that God is the same; yesterday, today and tomorrow?

I believe God offers us two opportunities to determine our answers to these questions. The first is prayer. It seems an obvious answer. Prayer is what we do as Christians, right? Prayer is our opportunity to go to God and ask for that which we need and trust that as our asking aligns with God's will prayers are answered.

We pray for everything. We pray for healing and health. Much of our joys and concerns this morning were for healing and health of the many friends and family now affected by this pandemic. It is, or I believe it should be one of the most natural things we as Christians do. Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel, Ask and it will be given to you. So we ask!

But have we ever really considered what it takes for God to answer? Just this past week in our Wednesday evening Bible study, we studied a section from Jonathan Cahn on changing the universe. In his book on "Discovering the Mysteries" Cahn reminds us that for God to act on our prayer means that God has to put events in motion not just in the present, but in the past as well so that all events required can line up perfectly with God's will.

That event of the birthing of Shepherd's Grace Church 12 years ago was not a simple feat of divining the right name. It was the conscious effort of God who starting preparing for this request even thousands of years before. It started with Abram and changing his name to Abraham. It continued with God's promise to make of him a great nation. From there to Israel and the enslavement of God's people in Egypt and to the point where God led God's people out of slavery and bondage to other Gods, God was working to prepare a framework for us so that we could know what was in the wilderness.

We were to know that wilderness was not only a place of death and destruction, but was also a place of reflection and contemplation. It was a place where we could recognize our sins and shortcomings and find "beginning."

From that wilderness beginning, God created a prolepsis. This is an event different from an apocalypse. God was not just breaking in, God was breaking in to the past to put in place events which would allow a future. God works this way, outside of time, in order for prayer to be answered.

In the fullness of time, God sent Jesus as savior to provide grace and truth and teach us about God's desire to love us. Prior to Jesus, we likely viewed God as a distant entity who had created and taught us and left us to our own devices with his teachings as guidance. After all, it had been 400 years since a prophet had heard the word of the Lord until that word came from John the Baptizer in the wilderness around Jerusalem!

From Jesus the message was diluted and distorted for a number of years by a church that became enamored with the possibilities of wealth and power. Indulgences from the wealthy financed the needs of the priests and allowed for them to ignore the poor and oppressed. About 1700 years after Jesus, Martin Luther came along and proposed a reformation that would rectify the situation.

The poor, the unfortunate, the downtrodden were once again recognized and the opportunity for service to them and inclusion of all in the church was possible. God had to change the universe through all of these actions in order to enable our prayer for a church called Shepherd's Grace and the opportunities we identified in our vision and mission statement.

This morning as we pray for people to be healed and made whole again for God's service, can you imagine the work God is having to do in the past to make this present prayer a possibility. "Comfort, o comfort my people," says Isaiah. He says this more than 500 years before the birth of Christ and it is the beginning of the prayer that brings about the fullness of time and the coming of a savior. Perhaps it is the same beginning that begins the answer to our prayers for healing. At any rate, it is a prolepsis, an inbreaking into the past that leads to God's will being accomplished in the present and the future. The power of prayer is "The Beginning" of a new opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God!

The second opportunity is to recognize the influence of others. Much of the music in this morning's service was chosen to offer hope. The second Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of Hope and it offers the chance to recognize one of the pillars of our faith. In Hebrews 11 it is written that "Faith is the evidence of things hoped for." We do not hope for what we can see. No one does that. We know what we can see but we live by what we trust. That trust is often called out to us through the influence of others. These others can be thought of at least in part, as "Angels."

John the Baptizer is an angel and on this Sunday morning he is an angel of hope. He brings an answer to the prayers offered in Isaiah over 500 years before. "Comfort, O comfort my people." "Proclaim the message of the Lord and make his path straight." Yes, the grass withers as do people and the flowers fade but the word of the Lord endures forever. It is this eternal word

that John brings to us this morning. It is the Love of God that calls out to us by an amazing grace!

John appears in the wilderness, in the midst of our contemplation, in our desire to break the bonds of slavery to sin and death and once again look forward to life; life without pandemic or restriction or alienation or abandonment. In that wilderness John speaks words of grace. He offers a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin!

He offers a baptism of repentance. A baptism which is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. He offers "The beginning." He offers a chance to start again in a right relationship with the Lord. He offers death to old self and new life! It is this new life in Christ that is at the heart of the promise of Christmas. It is this that we come for this morning! It is Hope!

From hope which we do not deserve that comes faith which we cannot see. From faith comes the courage we need to stand and seek God's grace. It is from that grace that we find the confidence of "The beginning." John offers this today!

The problem is that most of us would not recognize John. He is not the sort of angel we would look for. He is unkempt. He is ugly. He is perhaps dirty and downtrodden. He doesn't look like the pretty white angels we see at Christmas time, the ones who come down from heaven and sing loud hosannah's. John looks like those who have been ignored in our congregations for more than a thousand years. He looks like one who does not belong.

This time it is the song I composed a few years ago that comes to mind. "There are angels all around us." We do not recognize them because we have become so accustomed to looking for angels in positions of power. We want our God to come from a position of power and we want God's ambassadors to be perceived as creatures of influence. The struggle is that our God was born in a stable. He is first bed was a manger. The first to visit him were shepherd from a field who had not bathed or shaved or cleaned up before they made their appearance. The scripture reminds us that they went with great haste to see that which God had made known to them!

There are, though, angels all around us. These angels are often calling out to us. Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the "Beginning" for others who have not yet heard the good news. Share the good news so others can learn and then teach and share! Christ is the hope of Christmas! It is him. The beginning of the good news!

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we light the candles of peace and hope. Peace is Shalom, the fullness of promise. It is an understanding that nothing is missing. Even in the midst of a pandemic where we cannot begin to fathom what God is bringing, nothing is missing. God is present and God is preparing a Christmas that is beyond our wildest imagination! In Shalom, where nothing is missing and nothing is broken, the light of the world begins to illuminate our hearts.

We also light the candle of hope. In this candle the Light of the World grows ever brighter. It begins to allow us to look for those people and images which we might have missed. It begins to allow us to imagine the work of God, breaking into our past so that we might have a future. This light shines still in a darkness but we take heart because we know the darkness will not overcome it.

Come! Share the hope of Christmas. Share the light of the world. See the angels around you and me and let them surround us with their blessings and their proclamations that Christ is once again in the world and that we are once again at the "Beginning." Amen!