

“The Beginning of the Good News” (fn.:MARK 1 1-8.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Mark 1:1-8

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 12/8/19 [8:45am Service Only]

Mark 1:1-8: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

² *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

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

³ *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ”*

⁴ *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ ”*

Presumption and despair can be two faces of the same thing—arrogance. Presumption is false confidence, assuming that you know how things are going to turn out. Despair is particular kind of presumption, assuming that everything bad is going to happen.

Some forms of presumption take on the character of pride. It is reported that one of the tasks given to a servant in the entourage of the great emperors of Rome was to whisper in their ears: “Thou art mortal.” In other words, in the midst of the accolades and triumphs, of being hailed Lord and Master of the known world, this great ruler needed to be reminded that he was finite, mortal, passing. “Thou art mortal” was a reminder not to presume.

And when we do not live with blind presumption or pride, the false confidence of despair can kick in. One of those old “Peanuts” comic strips gives a graphic portrayal of what it feels like to be in the “despair.” Lucy and Charlie Brown are engaged in “heavy, deep, and real” conversation about the meaning of life. Lucy compares life to sailing on a cruise ship. She says that, “Life is like a deck chair. Some people place it so they can see where they are going. Some people place it so they can see where they have been. And some people place it so they can see where they are now.” Charlie thinks about Lucy’s soliloquy, then replies, “I can’t even get my chair unfolded.”

The Gospel of Mark addresses both arrogance of presumption and despair. The opening words of the gospel are “the beginning of the good news.” The beginning. And what a beginning! Mark’s Gospel does not begin with the sweet story of Jesus’ birth but rather with this jarring figure called John the Baptist. Mark does not tell of us of Bethlehem and angels, shepherds and wise men. He tells of John the Baptist.

John eats things we would not even want to step on, much less touch. His wardrobe makes teenagers in wide, saggy pants and a pierced tongue look good. And what John says is even more startling. He says: “Repent, change, convert, get baptized and forgiven of your many sins.” He says: “Do something about yourself.”

But what can we do, if we presume everything is okay or everything is all bad? Indeed, you may know that cynicism that runs through us that says “Nothing we do can make a difference.” Living here in a university town, I am reminded of an observation by Duke University philosopher Alasdair

McIntyre. McIntyre thought that the modern university provided extended training in cynicism...training in saying “whatever!” At the university you learn that the world is fallen (Western Civ. 101), that human beings are caught in psychological/genetic/economic traps not of our own devising (that’s Psych. 101, Bio. 101, Econ. 101).¹

We get convinced that there is nothing we can do...except “Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we die.” We are helpless in being different, so we convince ourselves, that nothing is to be done. The preacher William Willimon remembered his time in Germany decades ago when the talk turned toward the dark days of the 1930s. Willimon noted that Germans would say, “We could do nothing about Hitler. What could anybody do? You Americans just don’t understand what it is like to live in a totalitarian state.”²

And yet, how often we presume to know we cannot do anything at all. And that is a totalitarian state, where we have no power or say-so. In the face of this, John the Baptist proclaims that you can do something. You can “Repent.” Be different, change, be transformed, turn away from the direction you have been heading. There is something you and I can do about our presumptions, our despairs, our cynicism: repent.

We can be changed—that’s the beginning of the good news. But all too often we remain chained to what holds us down, persuaded by our circumstances. Perhaps this will help you see what I mean. Back when the Ringling Brothers Circus was still in business, a group of ministers were given a backstage tour of their operations in the circus’s winter quarters in Venice. A minister in the group recalls this scene:

Coming in via the performers’ entrance, we passed by the elephant area. Someone noticed that the ropes around the elephants’ feet were not tied to anything. This oversight was pointed out to the handler. “Oh,” he said, “don’t worry. We never tie them up. We just tie a rope around their leg and drop it, and they think they are tied up.”³

The beginning of the good news is that we are no longer tied up. We are free to act, even if it simply choosing our outlook in facing the “unfixables” in our lives.

There should be several opportunities in the coming days to see some depiction of Jacob Marley, the partner of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Remember he is the first ghost that Ebenezer Scrooge sees. And Scrooge sees him weighted down with heavy lengths of chains. Marley is held down by all the sins of his past. And Scrooge, says Marley, has forged even heavier and longer chains. But Scrooge has the opportunity to repent, to change, to be different.

Repentance—that’s what John the Baptist style preaching evokes. But that is only the beginning of the good news. Wade Huie, my professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary, used to say that many people feel like they have heard good preaching only when they have been berated and scolded and shamed. In fact, he said that some people will not like your preaching unless you

¹ Drawn from a William Willimon sermon, “The Freedom of Honesty,” December 8, 1996, Duke Chapel; could not find a current source for this observation but had it in my files.

² *Ibid.*

³ Quoted from *Homiletics*, Nov./Dec. 1993 - online article for December 5, 1993

“whip” them. John the Baptist pulls out the whip. He names “names.” He calls people “snakes.” He tells them to straighten up their acts.

But it not enough. Repentance is a good beginning. But it is not enough. We can long for others to get straightened out. We can even confess to need to be straightened out ourselves. But we need more than confession and forgiveness. We need life.

And John the Baptist says that there is more to come. There is more to come than simply repenting and being forgiven of sins, as important as that is. He says that one who comes after me, I am not even worthy enough to touch his dirty sneakers. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Here is the real mystery of Advent and the anticipation of Christmas. This Jesus says that he has come that we might have life and life that is abundant. He did not mean a new iPhone in every stocking, the latest SUV in the garage, a college graduation and good job for every child, or even healthy body parts, even if we eat right and exercise right. But John does mean the life in the Spirit.

John says I baptize you with water, the water of repentance and forgiveness. But it is not enough. You need the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I am not talking about Pentecostal fever, with loud shouts and speaking in tongues. I am talking about life marked by the direction of God. There is an old proverb that says “The secret of life is not to do what you like, but to like what you do.” The more faithful way to say that is “The secret of life is to not like what you do, but like what you are called to do.”

To like what you are called to do. To like worship, not because you have been scolded and shamed into coming, but because you like what it does for you and in you. To like Christian Education opportunities, not because you have to come to Sunday School, but because you become a better person as a result. To like helping a neighbor, not because your mother or father said you “ought to,” but because it feeds your soul. To like the ability to pull out the checkbook or slide a credit card and donate to the American Red Cross, to the United Way, whatever the cause that calls to you. For example, I have decided that I am not going to pass by any Salvation Army ringer without making a contribution...and if the smallest bill I have is \$20, then so be it. I am going to listen to the call of that bell.

To like what you are called to do...not just what you like, but what you have a passion for—a passion for our youth knowing they are loved by their church, a passion for your service as a church officer, a passion for a society that does not ignore the homeless, a passion for a balanced economic system that recognizes that the “profits” of business include the environment, safety, and fair wages. The secret of life is not to like what you do. It is to like what you are called to do. It is to have a passion for causes that make others better.

The beginning of the good news is John the Baptist. His preaching cuts through all the presumptions that we know enough—we don’t know enough! His preaching calls us to confession and brings us to God seeking forgiveness. And God forgives us. God has mercy. God knows our weaknesses. God is patient with us. But that’s not all there is—for us to sin, for us to be confronted and shamed, and to make confession, and then for God to forgive.

The good news is that Jesus comes that we might have life—life in what we are called to be and to do. Abundant life is not the goal, just like happiness and contentment are not the goal. If you seek

them, you will always fall short. Abundant life, happiness, and contentment are the by-products of following your calling. Jesus promises them. They will be there, but they are not the goal, not the focus. They come along the way as we move from confession and repentance to following the calling of the Spirit.

The Jesus that comes after John the Baptist does come. And his first public action is to those occupied with making a living along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The one with the baptism of the Holy Spirit says to them: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." He still says them...he says to us today: "Follow me."