

Waiting for Peace

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Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Advent is a season of waiting—and most of us don't like waiting very much. In fact, we like waiting just about as much as we like change—many people don't like change either. This might help to explain why we tend to celebrate the miracle of Christmas – God bursting into human history unlike ever before – by doing the same things year after year after year. There's nothing wrong with tradition of course. The Bible is full of directions from God for establishing religious traditions—those traditions help to root us in memories of what God has done for us, and for those who came before us. And indeed our capacity for hope is grounded in our memories of the past. As I said last week, each present moment is the intersection of memory and hope, so even as we look toward a new future, we do so from the vantage of a remembered past.

Both our Biblical passages today are about beginnings, a break from what has come up until now. The passage from Isaiah is the beginning of the second part of the book of Isaiah, known as Second Isaiah. Although Isaiah is a single book, scholars now believe that it was composed by three different authors – the first forty chapters were written in the 8th century before Jesus shortly before the northern kingdom of Israel was invaded by Assyria. The second part of Isaiah, books 40-55, were likely written while the southern kingdom of Judah had been invaded by Babylon, who destroyed the temple and took the Jewish leaders to Babylon in exile. It opens with those beautiful words: Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. And it continues, offering hope – hope for a transformed future, and hope for the present transformed by the knowledge of God's ongoing tender care.

When Mark's Gospel was written, sometime around 65-70 in the Common Era, and was written to help Jewish Christians in Rome understand how the teachings of Jesus matter in their time. At that time, tensions were rising between the Jews and Romans. Rome's control over Judah had been established in 37 BCE, and at the time Mark was writing, a full-scale rebellion was emerging. And in the opening verses, Mark makes clear where his sympathies lie: "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, God's Son...." Mark makes it clear to the original hearers of his gospel, but much of what was clear to them is lost to us. So let's unpack this beginning.

"The beginning of the Good News..." Mark begins at the beginning – he is introducing a break with the past. What he is about to describe will be a new reality a new understanding, indeed, a new creation – the original hearers of his Gospel would have recognized this reference to the opening words of Genesis: "In the beginning..." Mark is telling us that what will follow will change the way we see the world. "The beginning of the Good News..." The word that Mark uses for "Good News" is *euaggelion* which is often translated "Gospel." We hear Gospel and we think, a story about Jesus, or perhaps, something that is true or authoritative. The people in Mark's time would have understood this differently. *Euaggelion* was a technical term. It referred to the news bulletin that would be sent from a battle front announcing victory. It also was used to describe political propaganda. So when Mark's

hearers heard this word, especially in conjunction with the word “beginning” it signified the announcement of a new order. It suggests that Rome has been displaced and that a new ruler is in town.

What next? “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, son of God....” We tend to think ‘Christ’ almost as the last name of Jesus. And even when we remember that it was a title, we miss its significance because Jesus is the only one we’ve heard with this title, and so we treat ‘Christ’ as part of the name of Jesus. But Christ meant Messiah—Mark was announcing that Jesus was the one to establish the new order, that it had already been set into motion. And in case anyone reading had any doubt that Mark is directly challenging Caesar, he adds a description of Jesus: “Son of God.” In the Roman Imperial tradition, the Emperor was believed to be divine. But Mark is instead asserting that Jesus is the Son of God. This is, by the way, why Christians were persecuted in Rome, because they refused to worship the emperor as a god. Christians were considered subversive. And not for the last time – again and again throughout history Christians have asserted that our loyalty lies with God before our loyalty to the State. That’s the significance of the banner downstairs with the crossed-out Swastika: it represents the Barman Declaration, a confession of faith developed in Germany during the Nazi era, which was resisting fascism, declaring that Christians have a loyalty to God that precedes loyalty to the state.

Most of us are familiar with the expectation that the Jewish people had, of a Messiah who would come and reestablish the independence of Israel. And we know that one of the conflicts that Jesus encountered was the conflict between that expectation of a Messiah, and his being non-militaristic, and yet claiming to be the Messiah. But we should never make the mistake of thinking that because Jesus was not a military leader that he was not political. The ministry of Jesus was profoundly political – he challenged the Empire, and he criticized those who were complicit with the Romans in exploiting and oppressing their own people: the priests and scribes who ran the Temple and the whole economy of Jerusalem, based on a theology of sacrifice, which economically exploited the people by demanding that they financially support the Temple and the market of providing animals for sacrifice. By some estimates, this Temple apparatus constituted 90% of the economy of Jerusalem but it benefitted very few people. It was the “1%” of Jesus’ time.

Jesus was non-military, and he taught non-violence, but he was not apolitical. One of the main themes of Mark’s Gospel (and Luke’s as well) shows his concern for the poor and oppressed people of his time, and his own ministry to those on the margins. This opening statement “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ: Son of God...” is a profoundly political statement.

When I say political, I’m not talking about partisan politics – this has nothing to do with Republicans and Democrats. This has to do with who has power and resources and who has access to power and resources. And while the ministry of Jesus was to those on the margins of society, Mark reminds us that it began with those on the margins geographically. He then moves to describing what is happening in the wilderness, and in Mark’s story, this is a key announcement. The movement of Jesus begins in the countryside and is heralded by John’s prophetic ministry in the wilderness. In the Empire, power is based in the cities. But Mark is saying that the real action is taking place in the wilderness.

Not only is there a new order, but it functions differently than the current order. The tension between rural and urban is not new apparently.

So, when I say that Jesus was political, does that mean that he wasn't a spiritual leader? Not at all – for Jesus, and for Mark, the spiritual is political. What we believe about God and the world and the people of the world is shown in how we behave in the world. How we love God is shown in how we treat people. And for both Isaiah and Mark, caring for the poor, the ill, the hungry, the excluded – the least, the last, the lonely and the lost—is central to our spirituality. It goes back to the Hebrew word for peace: *shalom* which was a holistic word, including the absence of war, but also wholeness and balance in our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, our relationship with our own body, even our relationship with money. We lit the second Advent candle this morning, the candle symbolizing peace. Where do we find peace? For the Hebrew people, peace was a holistic, multidimensional concept—it begins with our relationship with God, and is lived out in all the ways we live our lives.

And as Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, this new way of understanding the world, of looking at people, and relationships, and institutions from a God's-eye view, the poor and oppressed were important. Each of us is important. Each of us makes a difference. Even in times such as the time of Mark when there were “wars and rumors of wars” the work of God's Kingdom lies within each of us. So we don't wait for peace; we work for peace. We work for right relationships, and good health, and access to food and education and safe water and fair housing. And we don't just appeal to government; we work for change where we are.

And God's care for the poor is grounded in “for God so loved the world” and in “peace on earth, good will to all”—God's love for all of us means God loves each of us: the rich, the poor, the powerful, the meek, the healthy, the ill, the have-a-lots, and the have-nots. And God cares deeply about how oppressive systems harm the souls of those who are benefitting from inequality too. We won't get to this story until much later in Mark's Gospel, but when the rich young man came to Jesus to ask how to have eternal life, Jesus looked at him and loved him, and then said, “Go, sell what you have, and give the money to the poor.” Jesus loved him. And we miss important parts of the ministry of Jesus if we only see his care for the poor, and don't recognize his teaching about what happens to the souls of the wealthy. We all are loved.

Some scholars suggest that the opening verse to Mark's Gospel—“The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ: son of God—is referring to the whole Gospel as the beginning. The story of Jesus tells the story of the beginning of this Good News, this new order. And the story of those who follow Jesus tells the rest of the story – our story is part of the Greatest Story Ever Told. What happens with God's Kingdom depends on how we respond to it. We are the rest of the story. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with us. Amen.