

Advent 2 – Peace

December 10, 2017 Mark 1:1-8 Roger Barkley

Most of us spent the week with tightness in our lungs and stinging in our eyes from the smoke and the howling winds.

There seemed to be no end to the destruction as flames exploded over hillsides and new fires erupted without warning.

An ominous aura of impending doom hung over everything.

It was the perfect setting for reading the opening lines of the Gospel of Mark where Jesus steps into a world of cosmic conflict and human suffering.

Mark was written about 70 CE, a decade before Matthew and Luke, and several decades before John.

Although there were a couple of collections of Jesus' sayings circulating, as well as all of the Apostle Paul's letters, Mark was the first to write a narrative account of Jesus' ministry.

Mark essentially invented a new literary genre.

Most likely, Mark entitled his work, *The Beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God*, but somewhere along the line a scribe mistook that title as the opening line of the text and subsequent manuscripts replicated his error.

That means that Mark intended the first line of his work to be the conflated quote from Micah and Isaiah about a prophetic voice calling from the wilderness.

We translate the word "gospel" as good news, but often miss that in the Hellenistic context it could have the inference of "good news from the battlefield".

So, our earliest gospel does not open with shepherds in the fields, holy men following a star, or Mary and Joseph huddled around their baby.

No.

For Mark, Jesus' story opens with the prophetic announcement that God is on the move.

The scene instantly cuts to Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit descending upon him saying, *You are my Son whom I love; with whom I am well pleased.*

Immediately, Jesus is driven into the wilderness where he is confronted by Satan.

With that behind him, Jesus calls for repentance, gathers disciples, drives out an evil spirit in the seaside village Capernaum, heals many others, recharges with prayer in a solitary place, soon returning to heal a man with leprosy ... and all that within the first 45 verses of chapter 1!

There is a world in crisis, a cosmic battle to hold back advances by Satan, and Jesus lands right in the middle of the battlefield and wastes no time getting started.

Mark's sixteen-chapters unfold exorcisms, demon-thwarting miracles, and the sun-darkened crucifixion.

Mark's narrative is one of apocalyptic struggle from beginning to end.

What a book to read under the sooty, orange sky.

You may have seen those black and white newsreels from World War II.

People would go to the movies, but before the main attraction they'd be shown battle scenes of courageous Allied soldiers charging out of foxholes to drive back Japanese armies, and brave American airmen braving artillery and flak to rain bombs down on Hitler's factories.

Like Mark's gospel, those newsreels were good news from the battlefield.

When I see looming disaster – the hillsides aflame, threats from North Korea, daily revelations of sexual abuse, powerful politicians who seem to have abandoned traditional principles – this is the kind of Savior I want.

As Mark wrote his gospel, the dust was just settling from Rome's total destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

The heart of Jewish faith, the center of everything they held sacred, was reduced to a pile of rubble.

The Romans hunted down and then executed people by the thousands, and then even carried away most of the temple bricks so that it could not be rebuilt.

Mark's good news was written to people fresh from that experience.

And notice that the title is, *The Beginning of the Good News ...*

That means that everything Mark writes about Jesus – all the healing, preaching, teaching, exorcising, and even his death and resurrection – are *only the beginning* of the good news.

There's more to come.

Mark did not attempt to write the whole story because he did not know how it would work out.

This helps make sense of the unsettling conclusion of the gospel, where the women flee the empty tomb as the angel speaks to them:

Mark 16:7-8 *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”*

(What will they do?) *Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

How the ministry of Jesus continues with his battle against the powers and principalities of the world and the demons of our souls is left up to us.

Will we succumb to fear, or will we continue the good news?

This passage from Mark is a traditional reading for the second Sunday of Advent, which may seem odd as we are busy mailing manger scene Christmas cards, wrapping presents and planning Christmas dinner.

But it actually is exactly the right choice when we remember that Advent is intended to be a season of urgent waiting for a savior.

There is waiting and there is waiting.

Several years ago, I was in Dr. Tung's waiting room, waiting for my routine, annual physical.

He'd been delayed and so I was left reading and re-reading an old issue of *US Magazine* with its titillating stories about celebrities I didn't know and behind-the-scenes tidbits about TV shows I'd never seen.

I grew impatient of waiting – I have a busy life; I had things to get to.

But a few weeks later I was again in a waiting room, but this time waiting to get biopsy results.

That was an entirely different experience of waiting.

That waiting had an urgency about it – my life might hang in the balance of those results.

The Advent of Mark is for those in the midst of the second kind of waiting.

Read the headlines ... the world is in real danger.

War, dramatic weather changes, a rising tide of racism, an explosion of homelessness ... and national leaders who act impetuously and seem morally bankrupt.

Can we hang-on much longer before God steps in to help?

In addition, many of us are personally carrying heavy burdens of health issues, trying to forgive people who have wronged us, feeling shamed or rejected, sandwiched between caring for children and parents ... all the stuff of life.

When we hang-on in faith, Mark is our kind of gospel.

And, Jesus does not call us to passive waiting – wringing our hands, hoping that everything will just work out for the best, cynically saying our vote and our voice don't matter.

By verse fifteen of this chapter, Jesus is enlisting disciples to learn his ways and to follow in his footsteps – he’s recruiting you too into a movement.

When the church sees itself as a Jesus movement, then people get healed and disciples become peacemakers.

But when the church sees itself as an institution, then it’s self-preservation takes front and center.

Consider the church’s long, inexcusable history of protecting clerical sex abusers.

Transferring abusive priests from parish to parish, paying hush money, and keeping accusations hidden from the public.

Leaving the carnage of ruined lives in its self-justifying wake was the institutional church’s *modus operandi* for years.

The rationale is that the church does good work and such revelations would tarnish the image and thereby hamper its valuable ministries.

The institution must be protected at all costs.

But it merely created a moral culture rotting from the inside out.

In recent months we’ve see people with strong political positions – Democrats and Republicans – wrestle with the same dilemma as the church had in past years.

Frankly, my skin crawls when I see pastors (the men and women ordained to represent the heart of Jesus Christ) physically embracing Roy Moore as they parade him in front of their congregations to give their endorsements.

And it’s not just his life-long history of vile depictions of homosexuals and black Americans.

This a man with a long and credible series of accusations about stalking and abusing teenage girls while he was serving as an assistant district attorney.

But, wanting his conservative vote in the Senate, people who have most waved the banner of Christian morality rationalize their support.

Democrats have had some similar moral wrestling.

Abuse is a power issue, not a political issue.

From Hollywood, to politics, to public radio (for goodness sakes!) – a critical mass of victims has gathered so that more and more women (and some men) feel empowered to tell their stories.

And who has stood by the victims as they were challenged, ridiculed and even blamed for what happened to them?

The family values crusaders?

No ... it's been the secular world that in some areas of life today seems well ahead of the church, which is supposed to be a moral beacon.

What Would Jesus Think?

Maybe it's time to repent – which is the second theme of this opening chapter of Mark.

Mark 1:4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Most people think of repentance as saying, “I’m sorry, and pinky-promise I’ll never do that again”.

But frankly, such promises seldom pass the test of time.

Repentance is treating the underlying disease, not just a symptom.

Repentance is realizing that God is pointing you one way, that you’ve been traveling another way, and then changing course.

To repent is to change because we see how we’ve been out of step with God’s plans for peace and equity for all people, and then envisioning how we will get in step with God.

Jae Ann made a bold statement with her art work on today’s bulletin cover about peace.

It is not the candles and mistletoe you'd normally expect for the Advent / Christmas season, it is a profound meditation on how to be a peacemaker.

Just as with her graphic, I have within me the dark figure who would gleefully mow down my enemies, and the smaller but brighter figure who is confronted by the dove of peace.

Peace in our world begins with giving voice and empowering the potential peace dwelling within ourselves.

So, the emphasis of repentance is less on what we've done wrong, and more of what is right about what we will do differently.

Like you, I am overwhelmed by our political situation and by revelations of people I have admired being exposed as abusers.

Like you, I am overwhelmed by the growing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small percentage of our population.

Like you, I was overwhelmed by the images of the fires towering over the firefighters.

But I also see that with each firefighter doing his or her part, the fires are eventually controlled.

I also see that with each woman bravely stepping forward, a little bit of the culture of abuse is thwarted.

So, we can't fix everything – only God can do that.

But God has enlisted me, and you, to do our part with what we have in our corner of the world.

My favorite pizza shop in the whole world – 786 Degrees – baked dozens of pizzas and took them to the front lines.

They didn't put out the fires, but they did what they do best: bake pizzas, with which they fed some firefighters.

We can't replace an entire destroyed business, but we can help PJ rebuild his business lost in the Santa Rosa fire.

This week, why not take a few minutes to daydream what God's vision for a portion of your life might be.

Not where you've gone wrong, but where God would have you go right.

I chose the word "daydream" because God invites us to dream something beyond what we might presently see.

To daydream is not to set a goal to be achieved, but to reveal a dream that inspires a new course.

Is there an unhealthy relationship to repair?

Can you daydream ways to use your time differently and toward better ends?

Is there some practice or habit to take up to produce a healthier or more abundant life?

Meditate on Jae Ann's picture and daydream about how God would like to awaken that peace-loving person inside.

And then as part of your Advent waiting, begin a change.

The Savior you urgently await will be your partner in this holy work.