

“God’s Peace Come Down From Heaven”

Mark 1:1-8

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Brentwood First Presbyterian Church - Mike Magee

Advent begins the Christmas season

I have a friend who took his son to Minnesota to see the headwaters of the Mississippi. In Minnesota he and his son stepped across those headwaters of the Mississippi River. It was no more than a tiny stream. It is amazing that a river so mighty can begin in such an inconspicuous way. Perhaps we have a similar experience as we read the first chapter to the Gospel of Mark. No angels visit with us here. Caesar Augustus and Herod seem pretty far away. No Christmas trees or shopping malls or parties! All Mark offers to us is John the Baptist, Martha Stewart's worst nightmare, smelling like a camel and calling people to change their ways.

But ask anyone in the New Testament how you get to the little town of Bethlehem and they'll say, "Go out to the desert; keep going till you get to the River Jordan. You can't miss it. You'll find a man out there, standing knee deep in the water, baptizing people. That's John the Baptizer. You ask him. If you want to go to Bethlehem, you've got to start there. There is no other way to get there." They all say the same thing, all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They all say that if you want to go to Bethlehem, you've got to start with John the Baptizer.

Henri Nouwen once said, "If we do not wait patiently in expectation for God's coming in glory, we start wandering around, going from one little sensation to another. Our lives get stuffed with newspaper items, television stories, and gossip. Then our minds lose the discipline of discerning between what leads us closer to God and what doesn't, and our hearts lose their spiritual sensitivity."

As you scurry around with all the details that go with this season of the year, you might remember Chopin's minute waltz. Composer Frederick Chopin once visited the home of a friend and watched the family dog chase its tail around and around. Chopin later wrote a piece of music to accompany this tail-chasing. He called it "The Little Dog Waltz," and today it is known as "The Minute Waltz." I have on occasion thought "The Tail Chasing Waltz" was the theme song for my life. Maybe it is also the theme song for your life. But there is a way to stop the tail chasing waltz. There is a ticket off the merry go round. That ticket is God's peace.

Jesus is God's peace for us

The strangeness of Advent points in a side-door way to the mess we are in. Indirectly, this season whispers to us about the "out of focus world" in which we live. It is not easy to explain the mess we are in. In his book, *The Coming Faith*, Carlyle Marney suggests

that humankind "is the most savage of the beasts" that our bite is poisonous, our hands are clubs, and our feet are weapons. According to Marney, "nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting" as we are. Confuse us, and we lash out at anything. Crowd us, and we kill, rob, destroy. Deprive us and we retaliate. Impoverish us, and we burn villas in the night. Enslave us, and we revolt. Pamper us, and we may poison you. Hire us, and we may hate both you and the work. Love us too possessively, and we are never weaned. Deny us too early, and we never learn to love. Put us in cities, and all our animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing. Mr. Marney clearly has a pessimistic view of human nature.

But with God's help, with Jesus as our role model, humankind is also capable of good things. Our words can build up. Our feet may carry us to places of need. Our hands can offer a caring touch. Nothing in nature is so well equipped by God for loving and healing as are we. Confuse us and we often run for community; crowd us and we usually seek solutions. Deprive us, and we organize for a better tomorrow. Impoverish us, and we bargain collectively. Enslave us, and many of us will practice nonviolence. Pamper us, and we may instead seek strength. Hire us, and we usually work hard. Love us, and we are fulfilled. Deny us, and we seek. Put us in cities, and we try to enjoy life. We call this second vision living in God's peace.

There are two kinds of peace. Personal, private peace, and peace on a bigger scale.

Duke University did a study on personal, private, "peace of mind." Factors found to contribute to personal, private peace, are:

- 1) The absence of suspicion and resentment.
- 2) Not living in the past.
- 3) The wisdom to discern what we CAN change, and not wasting time and energy on those things we CANNOT change.
- 4) Resisting the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive when the going gets tough.
- 5) And here is the most important thing: finding something bigger than ourselves to believe in.

Every year, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, we reread the story written by Charles Dickens: A Christmas Carol. You remember the main character in the story. A surly old miser named Ebenezer Scrooge. He sees no benefit in being generous with the poor, or even providing a living wage to dedicated workers. He clutches onto his money. But it is not only his money that Scrooge withholds from others, he also withholds love and kindness, warmth and friendship. Then, one night, Scrooge is in a crisis. He sees himself

through the eyes of others. He has a vivid vision of his past; and then his present. But what is most frightful to him - what shakes him to the core of his being - is when he is granted the opportunity of a lifetime. He is allowed to witness his future. But his future proves to be so dark and frightening, that it prompts within him a dramatic change. He undergoes a radical transformation and becomes an entirely new person. Rather than being cold and indifferent to people, he becomes generous and compassionate. The Christmas Carol is a hopeful story. It provides us with the hope that we too can make needed changes in our lives. We can break free from the ruts we have burrowed, and the negative behaviors we have cultivated. We can become kind and compassionate, humble and hospitable, joyful and generous. I have never read anything which suggests this, but I wonder if the story of John the Baptist influenced Dickens and served as a model in his creation of A Christmas Carol.

When Jesus appears to his disciples, his greeting is, "peace be with you." The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. Something is lost in the translation. Shalom is a more comprehensive word, covering both the full realm of relationships in daily life, and expressing an ideal state of life. The word suggests the fullness of well-being and harmony untouched by ill fortune. As a blessing, shalom is a prayer for the best that God can give to complete one's life with happiness. If the concept of shalom became all too casual and light-hearted with no more significance than a passing greeting, Jesus came to give it new meaning. At Bethlehem God announces that peace will come through the life, ministry, words, and sacrifice of Jesus. The mission and ministry of our Lord makes it clear that Jesus comes to introduce God's reign of world peace.

We discuss today what takes away and gives us back our personal, private peace. But we also know what causes peace to stumble on a larger scale. We have seen it over and over again. The French Revolution. The Bolshevik Revolution. The American Revolution. The race riots of the 1960s. The perception of Middle Easterners that Americans do not care about the oppression of Palestinians. That perception that led to 9/11. Violence occurs because of injustice. You would think we would finally learn that there is no peace without social justice.

There is no peace without social justice

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after WW II, someone asked Albert Einstein what kind of weapons will be used in the third World War. "Well," he answered, "I don't know...but I can tell you what they'll use in the fourth world war. They'll use rocks." Today is Pearl Harbor Day. It is fitting that we light the peace candle on Pearl Harbor day. Pearl Harbor day was to my parents what 9/11 is to me today. A horrible event perpetrated by a group of people against our country. So in a way Pearl Harbor day is like 9/11. Lighting the peace candle today is fitting.

John calls the nation of Judea to repent. John's voice cries out across the centuries, and calls the nations of today to repent. Repent not just of things we have done, but also of things we have left undone.

A gift was given to pay for an entire order of nuns to go on a vacation. Vans were supplied, and all the necessary money for their trip was contributed. That summer, the nuns closed their house and headed to the vacation spot of their choice, the Rocky Mountains.

Most of them had never seen the Rockies. They were awed by their glory. They stopped and pondered and beheld and could not take their eyes off the majesty they were experiencing. But they noticed that every time they stopped, Sister Margaret would move to the edge of the group, and then disappear for a while. She'd return sometime later. They didn't know what she was doing.

So they next time they stopped, they followed her. She stole away from the group and made her way down into a gully. They watched her as she walked into the gully. She bent down and reached under a sizable rock, and then turned the rock upside down. She brushed her hands and turned around to walk back up the trail. When she looked up, the entire Order of nuns was watching her. "Margaret, what are you doing?" they asked. "I'm turning over a rock." she replied. "Why?" they asked. "Do you do that every time?" She answered, "Yes." "Why do you do that?" And she replied: "Because I will never pass this way again, and it's my intent to have made a difference while I was here. So I turn some rocks over so that this place is different because I passed here."

What rocks does a suburban church like Brentwood First need to turn over in Williamson County for the good of humanity? What rocks does a nation like the United States need to turn over for the good of the world? Regarding personal, private, peace, what rocks do I need to turn over inside of me? What rocks do I need to turn over for the Reign of God to make its way through all of the barriers I put up? I think there needs to be some rock-turning going on inside of me, in our church, and in our nation, so that, with the help of truth-tellers like John the Baptizer, we can privately, and as a church and nation, taste and smell the real experience of Jesus' birth - in the interior mangers of our lives.

To repent means to change behavior. And when we repent, when we change, we finally make room in our hearts for God's peace.

Conclusion

Every Sunday morning, the people of a church in the Pacific Northwest say, "peace be with you." They begin the worship service with a hymn of praise. The people confess their sins together, and hear of God's forgiveness. Then they are invited to turn to others around them and pass the peace. It has become an exuberant moment in an

otherwise sober occasion. Friends leave their pews to embrace one another. Newcomers are warmly welcomed with a kind word or a hug.

Nobody thought much about the weekly ritual until the pastor received a letter from a man who had recently started coming to that congregation. The new comer was a promising young lawyer from a prestigious downtown law firm. He drafted a brief but pointed letter on his firm's letterhead. "I am writing to complain about the congregational ritual known as 'passing the peace,'" he wrote. "I disagree with it, both personally and professionally, and I am prepared to take legal action to cause this practice to cease." When the pastor phoned to talk with the lawyer about the letter, he asked why the man was so disturbed. The lawyer said, "The passing of the peace is an invasion of my privacy."

Perhaps that story could only happen in the 21st century. These are strange times. I have no doubt that there are people who would take their church to court if too many people shook their hands, or if neighbors were too friendly, or if fellow pew sitters intruded upon their private religious thoughts. But I think the pastor's response to the lawyer was right on target.

The pastor said, "Like it or not, when you came to church you gave up some of your privacy, for we believe in a risen Lord who will never leave us alone." Then he added, "You never know when Jesus Christ will intrude upon us with a word of peace."

May Jesus Christ intrude upon you this Christmas. May hope, love, joy, and peace intrude upon you this Christmas.

All Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...