

THE BEGINNING

by

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

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(Second Sunday of Advent)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; and Mark 1:1-8

2 Peter 3:8-15a

⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Bill Goettler is an assistant dean at Yale Divinity School and co-pastor at First Presbyterian Church in New Haven, Connecticut. He tells a story that I identify with and maybe you can too at one level or another. The story is about a man named Danny who hangs out around the church where Goettler serves in New Haven. Most nights Danny sleeps on the street and occasionally asks the pastor and others for handouts. One night in the Christmas season, Danny asked the pastor for something to eat and for money for the bus. Goettler says that against his better judgment, he reached in his pocket and gave Danny a few dollars. As Danny turned to walk away, he asked the pastor this haunting question: "Is this the way it is supposed to be?"

It is a haunting question because you can take the question at so many different levels. Is this how it is supposed to be, one man begging another man for a few dollars to get something to eat and get in out of the cold? Is this how it is supposed to be, one person helping another person in need? Is this the way our system should be working? It could even be a question that Danny directed to himself, why is it that I am living this way? There are many levels at which you could understand Danny's question.

However you might hear it, it is not that different from John the Baptist's sermon in today's gospel reading. A voice in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Repent. Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Things are not how they are supposed to be. That was the message of John the Baptist. Who could argue, then or now?

In the text, people came from all over to heed John's warning to be baptized in the Jordan River and prepare for the coming of the Lord. They seemed to sense that John spoke a truth. Well, that was then and this is now. Maybe you too have that sense that things are not how they are supposed to be, either in your personal life or in our society or in the wider world.

In our world, maybe it is the tea parties and the Occupy Wall Street people who play the role of John the Baptist. I know there are differences in these two groups, but there are some similarities. Both groups can be brash and offensive like

John the Baptist, and both groups seem to be saying things are not as they are supposed to be.

The prophetic voice in the wilderness called for people to prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway. 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. That is to say that there is a call for a level playing field that the way of the Lord might be revealed.

Certainly in the scripture readings for today and even in our world there is a sense that things are not as they are supposed to be. In this setting, Mark begins his gospel with a verbless but hopeful sentence. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Into this state of affairs comes some good news. The Lord is coming, but as John reminds us, you must prepare for his coming.

It is interesting to think about what Mark may have meant when he began his gospel with the words “The beginning.” Did he mean that this is the beginning of the story that he is about to tell about Jesus? Or maybe he simply meant to refer to what follows immediately in the story, that the witness of John the Baptist is the beginning of the good news.

Perhaps, he meant the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, all the things he did early on in Galilee before he went to Jerusalem. But maybe Mark meant that everything Jesus said and did is only the beginning of what God will do in our world, only the beginning of the good news, that we should read Mark’s gospel not as past, but as present and future. It is the beginning of the good news that is still unfolding. The completion is yet to be realized, and you and I have a part to play in that.

Indeed, as the letter that we read today from Peter said, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day. God is patient as this good news plays itself out. And as much as it goes against our nature these days of instant messaging and 24-hour news and the desire to have it all now, we too must be patient.

If things are not as they are supposed to be, the good news is that a new creation is playing itself out that had its beginning in Jesus the Christ. And for all the talk that Peter has about a thief in the night and the heavens passing away and loud

noises and everything being dissolved and fire, he ends with a new heaven and a new earth. And that marvelous sentence that says, “We wait for new heavens and a new earth” and what will characterize the new heaven and the new earth is that it will be a place “where righteousness is at home.”

What a marvelous sentence: “We wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home.”

If things are not as they are supposed to be, the beginning of a new creation has already been set in motion. And Peter says, while you wait for it, be at peace. I looked up the word righteousness in a theological dictionary, and it said that the context of righteousness has to do with relationships, how we live in relationship to one another, how we treat each other. It is about relationships based on God’s grace and our faithful response.

Mark told a story about the beginning of a new kind of world where righteousness will be at home, a world by God’s grace and our faith where we treat each other better. Every now and then we see glimpses of the good news of where God’s world is moving. Slavery ends after a long and bloody battle, and as we move forward we try to do what is right in civil rights for all people. Apartheid gives way to truth and reconciliation. Troops come home. Undocumented people living in the shadows and working among us move toward legal status. Gay people serve in the military, in the leadership of cities and in churches. Age-old enemies become friends.

Mark’s story about Jesus is the beginning of a new world where righteousness is at home. We get there by the grace of God ever so slowly through repentance and forgiveness and patience and faith, hope and love, as that which is not supposed to be, gives way to a world where righteousness is at home, where we treat each other better.

I ask you today to give yourself and your resources to St. Paul’s to help make our world, at least our corner of the world, a place where righteousness is at home.