

Sermon for “Baptism of Christ” - January 10, 2021 (Mark 1:4-11)

There is so much happening in our world these days that it made sermon writing, at least for me, rather challenging. You do not need a synopsis of CNN and the NYT as you know as much or more than I do about what’s going on. On the other hand, as Karl Barth once intoned, the sermon should be preached with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

But let me digress for a moment. There is an Anthology of Advent - Christmas writings called ‘Watch for the Light’ which I tend to follow every season. There is an article by Thomas Merton which has made its home in my brain. (Thomas Merton being the Roman Catholic Priest, Trappist Monk, Poet, participant in Buddhist practice for some years, mystic (to mention a few), who died tragically while still in his prime.)

Merton reflected on the line in Luke’s Christmas narrative – “**but there was no room for them in the Inn**”. OK, so Mary and Joseph had to go somewhere else. But not so simple. Merton argues that Jesus could not have been born in an Inn – he would just be another child caught up in the push and pull of a society that was out of sorts, out of tune, out of harmony with God and creation. A world that was dying.

Listen to Merton’s description of mainstream society: (from the 1960’s, no less!)

We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time. Conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, speed, number, price, power and acceleration . . . there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought – ultimately, there is no room for humankind.

Dark, I know, but these are dark days. Merton’s point is that Jesus had to be born outside the rush and tumble, the violence and greed, the vacuous concerns of mainstream society. He had to be born outside and make his home with the marginal, the outcast, the poor and sick for there might be hope, faith and even love. There would be a yearning for an experience of God’s grace – for a new day, a new world.

Today we are told about John the Baptist and his proclamation of an end time – coming in from the wilderness, dressed like a wild hermit, he preached and exhorted. Repent and be baptized! And strangely, people responded by the hundreds.

John, the quintessential outsider. John, who left polite society and lived in a cave somewhere in the wilderness. He fasted and prayed and waited. In a word or a vision, John was given a ministry – go and prepare the way. One is coming . . .

These were end times . . . many believed the end of the world was near . . . the Messiah would be the sign of the end. So John preached and baptized and watched the crowds.

We know so little about Jesus' early days. Mark either lacked information (unlikely) or didn't see it as all that important. Salvation history is what this Gospel is about.

I always wonder about Jesus in his 20's . . . maybe you do as well. Was he just biding his time? Did he fully know who he was?

- A Carpenter in an insignificant village. When Phillip told Nathaniel that they had found the Messiah and he was from Nazareth, Nathaniel replied, "**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**"
- Jesus had studied Torah, I can only imagine the quality of sermons in the Synagogue in Nazareth. He waited and watched and didn't marry. The normal age for a man to become a Rabbi was 30. So about that time Jesus must have heard the Spirit's voice – go to the Jordan, go and see John.

I do not believe that Jesus and John were simply living out a script they had been handed in advance. I can imagine how John's knees weakened when he saw Jesus. Was this him, was this the Messiah?

In the other Gospels there is more development of John's character. He even seems to be fawning before Jesus and the coming of the Spirit was a public spectacle. But for Mark, John saw and began to understand. Jesus submitted to a Baptism for sinners and experienced the affirmation and blessing of God the Father and the gentle touch of God the Holy Spirit.

There were no fireworks, no headlines in the Jerusalem Post. They parted and to the consternation of John, the end did not come – or did it?

The world was ruled by Empires that rise and fall. The faith of Israel had been reduced to keeping arcane laws and sacrificing thousands of animals. The people were like sheep without a shepherd.

The poor suffered: archaeologists now believe the average Galilean had at most 2 meals a day. A meal mainly of flatbread and oil with cheese curd. Maybe some fruit in season. Wine was not consumed every day and when available was watered down. Meat was eaten infrequently.

There was no joy in the Synagogue as poor people cannot fulfill the Law.

This world too was coming to an end.

In the past decades our Churches have become trapped in the dominant culture. Jesus has become a multiplier of the blessings of a modern economy. Ever more and without the guilt.

The Church too, if we're not careful, finds room in the Inn, finds itself trapped in the maelstrom of an exploitive and secular culture.

How does the Spirit speak to us?

Today, the Spirit speaks to us through our Baptisms. Most of us were baptized as infants and had no say in the process – though some of us may have roared out in protest. That was then, but this is now.

We have become victims of the Hollywood event – so the Holy Spirit's blessing should have a St. Paul-like character. And sometimes it does – I would never deny that.

But for many of us, myself included, the Spirit tells us “something is wrong.” There's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with the world. We will seek other sources of solace for this feeling of angst. We may face the culture and be winners; we may find ways of soothing our pain; we may get lost in social media or travelling or a million and one diversions. But the pain remains. We are not at home here. Why?

The Holy Spirit wants to tell us, I believe, that the end has come.

That's a rather grim prescription, I know. But the end has come when we are only trying to earn, win, justify, or buy some way of making the pain go away. The solution just isn't in our control.

The “end” of the world is also good news. The Spirit asks us to look again at that One who threw in his lot with us. He could have become Ruler, built an Empire, wrote a book, gave a Ted-Talk. But he threw in his lot with the least, the last and the lost.

The world ended for Jesus at it will for us – bad news.

The world will be reborn, Christ lives - as will we - and the starting time is always today, now is the acceptable time.

The Church, and I include myself, has tried to keep a leg in both worlds. After all, we are not a cult, we are meant to be in the world as Jesus' disciples. But we are not to be part of a dying world – we are signs of creation being reborn. Our gifts are faith, hope and love. This also means humbling ourselves to receive the grace of Christ – already given in our baptisms, but wanting to be nurtured, lived and celebrated – reborn!

The old world is dying – the new world is waiting to be born . . . in us . . . Dare we believe it?

Remember your Baptism, and give thanks!