

Telling the Good News

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Nancy Turner Jones at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, December 7, 2008.

What is the gospel? If I asked you to stand this morning and make a statement defining the Gospel what would you say? Out of this entire book, or even out of the four books we call “the gospels” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, what would be the essence of that message?

Now you might be scratching your head, wondering, why would I be asking such a question? But the truth is – it is not an easy answer. Some years ago I served on a seminary faculty. When we interviewed candidates for faculty positions, the Dean would reliably ask the question – What is the Gospel? And I would watch learned, experience PhD’s hesitate, swallow hard before plunging into their answer. A dictionary defines the word gospel as the Good News or Good Tidings. Some might think of gospel song, named because the texts were taken from the gospel books and sing out the good news and the story of salvation.

And we heard it this morning in the opening line of the Gospel of Mark. Other translations use the word gospel, but this version uses Good News – The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark is the only one of the four gospel writers to label the book in this way. This is the good news of Jesus Christ, Jesus as the Son of God. What a way to begin a story – leaving no doubt in the hearer’s mind that this is the story of the Son of God. Good News!

And of course, anyone who opens their newspaper today could certainly use some good news today, as a church, as a nation, as a world. As we sit here today, we know that church membership continues to decline, not just in our denomination but in all of them. Even Evangelicals are reporting decline. Religious attendance fell from 41% in 1970 to under 30% today. Our own denomination has slipped from 3.6 million in 1965 to 2.2 million today. And then we look at our nation. In November U.S. Loses 533,000 Jobs in Biggest Drop Since 1974, largest monthly drop in a generation. Automakers are pleading for billions help. There are about 721,000 foreclosed homes on the market nationwide, up from 112,000 two years ago, Barclays Capital estimates. Analysts at Barclays expect the total to rise 60% before peaking in late 2009. to as much as 3 million. More than half of homeowners owe more on their house than it is worth.

And what about the world? Last month's terrorist attack on Mumbai, India, which killed 171 and wounded more than 200 confirms that terrorism is far from contained, and may be spreading and mutating into far more virulent forms. Over 5,000 of our military have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. And we don't see the end. Good News indeed. –we could use some.

How do we hear the good news message this year? How do we come into this holy season shouting Good News? Let's look at the opening of Mark's “good news” a little closer, We notice that the writer is looking back to the Hebrew Bible, quoting from Isaiah – our first reading today. A voice cries out: in the wilderness The Isaiah text is the message of a prophet preaching hope to a people in difficult times. The temple lay in ruins. Babylonian troops under Nebuchadnezzar had breached the walls of Jerusalem, torched Solomon's temple and leveled all

the buildings in Jerusalem. They made King Zedekiah watch the execution of his sons and then gouged out his eyes. Then the king and his most elite citizens were required to journey on foot to Babylon. In Psalm 137 we hear the poet's lament "by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1) A disillusioned group, descendants of Abraham and Sarah, had no nation and no homeland. They were a people desperately in need of hope - of good news.

For the Hebrews to find a highway, a straight and level road with no rough places, a highway to lead them home to Jerusalem would be a gift of grace indeed. The wilderness is also a metaphorical reality for our own lives. We have all been in the wilderness at one time or another. We have our own personal wilderness, traveling through life's darkness, experiencing our own weakness, need and vulnerability. Let us imagine our wilderness without the good news, without our Gospel, without our God. Imagine standing in that wilderness without the hope of hearing God's voice of comfort and guidance.

Our wilderness might be that we cannot pray to the God of grace that the child in trouble will somehow turn that life around, because there is no one to hear the prayer. Isolated and alone, we are without guidance and without hope. Or our wilderness might be the struggle with a broken relationship or divorce, with no one to turn to, and no one who really understands, with passing day more difficult than before. For many the wilderness is that funeral, and we stand there unable to hear the words of Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, because there is no grace, no forgiveness, and no life beyond this one. Disappointment and anger loom like great mountain ranges. After the diagnosis, we cannot light a candle in prayer for healing because there is no one to listen and no one to help. We cannot even hope for a blessed peace to end the wilderness journey because there is no heaven and no God to make one. We cannot sing "I am the bread of life and I will raise them up on the last day" because there is no hope of resurrection. That would be a life without God, without salvation, without advent hope, without the good news.

So I ask you again. What is the gospel, what is the good news of Jesus Christ? Isaiah 40 stands on the landscape and hears God say, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." If you could read that in the Hebrew, we would see that the verbs in those sentences are plural. A "southern" paraphrase might be, y'all - comfort my people. All of you - speak tenderly to the refugees, exiles, and broken-hearted." Isaiah challenges the exiles not to ignore their pain, but to share it with each other; not to pretend that all is well, but to console each other. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. All people shall see it together.

Together - together we can focus less on numbers here at church - and more on our mission of service. We can't do anything about the plummeting 401k's, or the housing market, but together we can bring comfort to each other and remember our dependence upon God and not ourselves. Together we cannot fix the world, but we can make a difference in our little part of it through housing initiatives, 5000 Club and plumb line. The challenge for us all is not to pretend there is no darkness, but to help each other find the light - together.

That is our Christian hope. Our hope, our Christian hope must be built on nothing less than God's work. The theologian, Jürgen Moltmann makes the case that hope is not one theme among many in Christian theology. Hope is the foundation for everything. Hope does not belong at the far edge of biblical faith, but in fact, pervades it – from the whole Biblical story – a complete and pervasive confidence in God, in every phase of life. God is not instrumental to our hope – God is the very substance of that hope.

This is the good news proclaimed by John the Baptist. This is our Advent hope, this is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!