First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

12-10-23

What Are We Waiting For?

Mark 1:1-8 NRSV)

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

 make his paths straight,’ ”4so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And the whole Judean region 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 strap of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent! It seems like it was just days ago that we were celebrating Christmas Eve, and here we are again. It feels like time has a tendency to speed up, the older I get. Anybody else feel that way?

We are in a new church year and this year; our focus is going to be on the book of Mark. If today’s New Testament reading seems familiar, that’s because it mirrors Matthew’s account of the events immediately preceding the baptism of Jesus. The similarities are so pronounced, in fact, that if Matthew and Mark had been sitting next to each other in school, they would have been accused of copying off of each other’s papers. That’s something we will have to explore at a later date.

We had an interesting discussion at Bible study, on Tuesday, which revolved around the meaning of verse 3 of this reading. The debate centered on who, exactly, the prophet Isaiah is talking to, when John quotes these words, *‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight…’* Now, Mark being a pretty straightforward kinda guy, doesn’t really offer any clarification, and assumes that his readers would automatically understand what he’s saying here.

One person interpreted this verse to mean that John the Baptist, alone, was the fulfillment of the Isaiah prophecy, based on what Mark says in verse 2, which reads, *“As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.”* And, on the surface, that is not a bad interpretation, but it seems a bit too passive for my taste. If the work of preparing the way is already done, where are we in this story? Does this reading simply become something that we can use to avoid doing the work that God has called us to do? I like to think that perhaps the author of Mark’s gospel put it this way to let us know that it’s not an either/or situation, where it’s all on John the Baptist or all on us, but a both/and one scenario, where preparing the way for Christ’s coming is something all of the followers of Jesus need to participate in.

So, what does it look like; what does it mean, to prepare the way for the coming Messiah and to make his paths straight? Neither Mark or Matthew offer any clues as to how to actually accomplish this, they pretty much leave us hanging out there, offering no real answers.

Perhaps the first step in understanding how we prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, can be found in the humility of John. This is important, because John was a celebrity and people came from all over the region, and even from Jerusalem itself, to hear John preach and to be baptized by him. John could have let all the fame and glory go to his head, but he didn’t. That humility; that willingness to humble himself by acknowledging that someone greater than himself was on the way, should serve as a lesson to all of us.

Bringing it into a twenty-first century context, does the Advent season; this season of waiting, mean that we simply coming to church every Sunday and singing the familiar Advent hymns, or hearing the readings as we light the Advent candles every week, and then going about our day to day lives as if nothing is going to be different? Or, does this season offer us an opportunity to humble ourselves and expand our thinking beyond anticipating the gifts we may receive on Christmas morning? I think y’all know how I’d answer that question.

In an age where the meaning of this season has been almost totally obscured by commercialization, we have an opportunity to create a different path. Brian McClaren, in his book, “We Make the Road by Walking” writes*, that Christian faith is still “in the making.” “It continues to grow, evolve, learn, change, emerge, and mature … in and through us. What we will be as Christians in the 21st century, for better or worse, will surely change what Christian faith will be in the 22nd century and beyond.* McClaren goes on describe his book this way, “*I wanted to introduce people to a vision of the Christian faith and the biblical narrative not as a box, set in stone, and not as a parking lot (where we await the ferry to heaven), but as a road … that is extended into the future by all of us, walking forward in the Spirit together.*

It is this vision of the Christian faith which *can* create the space for each of us to grow in our own understanding of what it means to prepare the way for the Kingdom of God.

What would it look like if the spirit of giving, the hopefulness, the joy in anticipating the birth of Jesus; what if that became the norm all year round? What if instead of writing one big check at the end of the year to the charities and causes that we support, simply to reduce our tax liability, we gave generously all year? What if the hope that many of us feel in this season, was something that we spread every day of the year? What if the joy we felt in the birth of a brown skinned, middle eastern child, was something we shared with everyone we met? For me, all of this would look like we were preparing the way.

So, I’ll ask you; What are we waiting for? Are we going through the motions, celebrating this season simply because it’s tradition and we’ve always done it this way? Are we waiting for someone else to do the work? Are we just waiting to see what Santa has left us under the Christmas tree? Or are we willing to use the touchstone that this season provides each of us to enhance, to grow, to evolve our own faith?

I believe we are called to be open to a different understanding of the words of Isaiah, and to see them as not simply words spoken in the past tense; not simply as words and work solely done by John the Baptist, but as words we are challenged to live out in the present tense, in the here and now, in order to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven for all of God’s children. What that looks like may be different for you than it is for me, and it may be uncharted territory for all of us. In the end, we won’t bring about the Kingdom of Heaven, by doing nothing. Let us humble ourselves before one greater than any of us and take that first step to prepare the way for God’s kingdom on earth. What are we waiting for? AMEN