

December 10, 2023

Rev. David Jones for MacNeill Baptist Church

Mark 1:1-8

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

2Peter 3:8-15a

Down By The River

The setting for today's Gospel story is in the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan River, within travelling distance from the city of Jerusalem, in the region of Judea. An eccentric figure by the name of John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, inviting all near and far to come to him, that they may be immersed in the water, after acknowledging and confessing their transgressions. And he was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey, much in the same manner as the prophet Elijah, in contrast the courtly lifestyle of the Sadducees and the finery of the Pharisees. People from the whole Judean countryside, and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, that they might undergo the baptism he offered, and thereby obtain forgiveness, in preparation for the arrival of the one who is to follow. Thus John also proclaims that the one who is to come after him is more powerful than he, a figure whom not even John is worthy of to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals, for although John is baptizing with water, this figure will baptize with the Holy Spirit, bestowed upon those chosen by God, to fulfill God's purposes.

So begins the Gospel according to Mark, an account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, subsequently recognized as the Christ or Messiah, long-awaited by first century Judeans, suffering under the yoke of oppression from the Roman occupation of their land since 63 BCE. Unlike the other synoptic accounts, the reader is immediately encouraged to focus on the pending arrival or advent of the central character; there is no prelude including either esteemed visitors from the East or angels announcing his birth to shepherds in the field. Instead the emphasis is upon preparing for his arrival on the scene, without fanfare or adulation, as if the author wants to get straight to the point. In fact there is an urgency about the entire Gospel, captured by use of the word "immediately" throughout its length, as Jesus moves from one location to another, ultimately arriving in Jerusalem, not only the capital of Judea, but also its religious centre. The latter half of the Gospel is then taken up with what transpires after his entrance into the city, and the meaning of these events in retrospect.

Composed by a second generation Christian, in all likelihood soon after the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman army in 70 CE that ended the Jewish revolt begun four years earlier, the account is not only the shortest, but also the earliest of the synoptic narratives about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In fact the Gospels of Matthew and Luke incorporate much of the material found in Mark into their own accounts, and also follow the author's basic structure in telling the story. It's an account written for a Gentile audience, perhaps in the city of Rome,

but possibly in the cities of Alexandria or Antioch, and often narrates the journeying of Jesus from one place to another, where he performs miracles, speaks in parables, and confronts the Judean religious authorities of his day. From this standpoint it's important to understand that the account is not so much a biographical description, as a theological interpretation of his life, death and resurrection, and its significance for those who become familiar with its content. In this respect it's similar to the accounts of Greek or Roman heroes, which describe the feats accomplished by them, as they overcome various obstacles seemingly poised to defeat their purposes, thereby causing them to give up their quest. Jason and the Argonauts is a good example.

The author starts his account by adapting a quote from Second Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, which indicates that what is about to follow is of great significance, for the verse describes preparations that are undertaken in advance of the arrival of a monarch about to enter his territory. Hence the need to ensure that no obstacles are present to obstruct the way, which may impede his arrival, thereby interfering with the procession. All must be made right in advance, "making his paths straight", that he may enter his kingdom with all the pomp and circumstance appropriate to his bearing. In this regard John the Baptizer acts as a royal herald, announcing the king's approach and the need to adequately prepare for his arrival, that he may be welcomed by those over whom he reigns, as a sign of veneration and respect, in recognition of his importance.

In this respect John's call to the people in and around Jerusalem to be baptized is very much in keeping with the need to prepare for the arrival of the figure who is to follow him, for he is none other than the Messiah, who through his actions, not only will be proclaimed King of the Judeans, but also Saviour of the world, in contrast to Caesar Augustus, also known as the same, following his ending of the Roman civil war at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. But why baptism? What is it about this practice, now performed not only by Baptists, but by other Christian communities, signifying an adult believer's acceptance of the Messiah as Saviour, following his or her decision to become one of his disciples? The answer lies in recognizing that in first century Judea, baptism was a rite of purification, whereby an individual was cleansed of his or her sins, allowing for him or her to enter the Temple, and make the appropriate sacrifice to God, for his or her transgressions. In fact throughout Israel today, and within Orthodox and Conservative synagogues elsewhere, may be found baths constructed for this very purpose, known as Mikveh. And so by inviting people to be baptized, John is implying that the one who is to follow him is also divine in nature, to be equated with the same God to whom they made sacrifice in the Temple. And so right from the very beginning, the author of Mark is telling his audience that this figure is no ordinary man, but in fact one of supernatural origin, much like the Greek and Roman heroes many of whom his audience knew of from birth.

Of course we're all familiar with how the story ends however. Rather than overcoming the obstacles in his way, Jesus instead is crucified by the Romans at the behest of the Judean authorities and attending crowd, and dies an excruciating death, subsequent to which he is buried. And yet three days later, some of those who had chosen to follow him, begin to proclaim that he in fact was not dead, but very much alive, having risen from the grave. In a startling turn of events, he who had died a criminal's death instead becomes a hero unlike any other in the ancient world, by overcoming the greatest obstacle of all, that of death itself. And the rest of the story, as the saying goes, is history, as each of his followers begin identifying him as God incarnate, and eventually the third person of what we now know as the Holy Trinity. A story of unbelievable proportions, there were many who rejected the claim of his divine origin as there were those who accepted it, both Judean and Gentile alike, but each for different reasons. For the Judean he was an offence as God's chosen one, for he was no warrior-king like David, but rather gave himself up to be crucified, succumbing to the very people he was to defeat in battle; for the Gentile to consider him as somehow divine and thus worthy of veneration was preposterous, for not only was he a criminal, but also of humble birth and reputation, certainly not in keeping with the traits of a hero. And yet for those who heard the story at a deeper level, it rang full of hope and the promise of a better life, one in which domin-ance, the chief characteristic of Greco-Roman culture, as demonstrated by the repeated public display of the phallic symbol, no longer held sway.

The author of Second Peter reminds us that not only has Christ come, but also that he will come again, at a future date unknown to anyone but God. Composed some twenty years or so after the Gospel of Mark, he addresses the issue why many of those who chose to follow him have now died, prior to his coming again, this time to judge the "quick and the dead", and restore the earth and the heavens in all their beauty and grace. Rather than focusing on why his return hasn't occurred, the author encourages his readers to ignore those "false prophets" who have arisen amongst them, questioning whether this event will take place, and instead concentrate on leading lives of godliness and holiness, striving to be at peace with one another. He emphasizes that the Day of the Lord in fact will happen, but at a date and time of God's own choosing, and not before all people have opportunity to repent and believe in the Gospel, and thereby obtain eternal life.

And so as we prepare for God's having entered the world some two thousand years ago in the form of a helpless baby, may we too find ourselves at peace with one another, seeking to lead lives that are pleasing in God's eyes, reflective of our baptism, and in keeping with John the Baptizer's call to make straight his paths. Perhaps this may involve the reconciling of differences between family or friends, perhaps it may involve the acceptance of things we cannot change and the wisdom to know the difference, perhaps it may involve the granting of forgiveness to those who have wronged us, whether intentionally or not. For ultimately it is up to us to determine how we chose to lead our lives, in a world that so frequently ignores the

opportunity provided by the coming of Christ, and instead follows paths set out by the “false prophets” of our time, preaching a different Gospel, one in which pursuits that run counter to its message of self-sacrificing love are often promoted. And perhaps, just perhaps, as we go about our preparations we once again will hear John the Baptizer’s words down by the river, “He is coming, He is coming, He is coming”. AMEN.