

“You are my Son”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571—Preaching Text: Mark 1:1-8

6 December 2020—Second Sunday of Advent

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“The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit” (—N. Henderson).

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Please, hear the day’s lesson:

[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And 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. [6] Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] He 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. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. [10] And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11] And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:4-11).

A problem Christians always face is deciding who Jesus is. In childhood, this wasn’t a problem. People in our early life orbit gladly offered us guidance. Aunts and uncles, Grandparents, friendly neighbors—these people cared for us and answered our questions, however tedious. We begin as children with an extended family helping us with the big questions. Now, too many of us face a life that leaves us to our own devices. We try to discover what and how we can on our own plumb life’s meaning.

Now and then, I hear of parents who take their children to a doctor when sick, or require them to attend school. Yet, these sensible parents may say about a child’s religious training: “We don’t push too hard about church. When they are older, they can decide.” I propose that giving children a sense of right and wrong—or a life of purpose, meaning, and value—is as vital as reading or straight teeth. We need to equip youngsters with tools to make fitting decisions. We’ve come a long way from Emma Goldman’s (1869-1940) days. She, an American anarchist, said, “The strongest bulwark of authority is uniformity; the least divergence from it is the greatest crime.” Today, it is everyone for themselves—even our children. We have bent over backwards so far to avoid being controlling that we have lost authority—and there is a big difference between the two. Authority is not always a bad word. This is why understanding

scripture is crucial. We all need a firm center to hold together the flying debris of our 2000 years+ of social policy decisions—like misogyny or *de facto* segregation. The Bible has served us well. And although we may disagree on various interpretations, we have scripture as the shared ingredients for Christian conversation.

Mark's story begins telling who Jesus is, and why Jesus has come. Mark is more direct than our other Gospels. For example, when Matthew relates Jesus' baptism, there is a wrangle before John relents and baptizes Jesus. Luke, too, offers details of the baptism—Jesus was praying, for example—that Mark does not tell. John's Gospel addresses Jesus' baptism, but differently. Mark's story first tells us that when John came and proclaimed, then all the people went out to him. We learn that John baptized many in the Jordan and the people confessed their sins. John's influence triggered the people's confession. Now they can possess "new life."

A second part of Mark's text tells us who John the Baptist is: "the one to announce the Messiah who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." John is an interesting character. He neither lives like other people, nor seems to care. He dresses peculiarly—"clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt." His diet is stranger still; locusts and wild honey. Most visible about John was his message. John proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The word repent stems from a Greek word "*metanoia*," meaning "to turn around." John's message was for people to turn from a life direction they were going—from an old life to a new life Jesus offers.

A third part of Mark tells us that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. When Jesus comes up out of the water, he . . .

“. . . saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' ”

Only Jesus and readers/hearers of Mark detect a voice. Others must wait for Jesus' story to unfold to see who he really is. Interestingly, just as at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Mark writes, "the heavens [were] torn apart," we also see the phrase, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Mark 15:38) at the end of Mark. The obscure reference to tearing of heavens and the temple curtain offer clues to Jesus' import; sent by God. Both heaven and earth reveal the Messiah's power and authority. What does this mean for us? Perhaps, it can give us a hope-filled perspective on the community of faith and cooperation. Healthy churches and Christians know that the gospel offers a life shared with confidence. If we need convincing that we live in a world

searching for meaning/values, then consider these examples of modern culture's attempt to find "the good life."

- A *Time* magazine news item says that "vacationers who have grown weary of white-water kayaking, dangling from cliffs, and other trendy adventure trips are now turning to spiritual vacations featuring meditation and silence."
- During a recent year, New Agers spent more than \$100 million dollars on quartz crystals, believed to possess healing and thought-transmission powers. That year, Americans spent another \$300 million on audio-tapes and books that promise spiritual fulfillment of every kind, including, in one case, "out of body experience in thirty days."
- An ABC documentary about the spiritual revival taking place in this country, titled "Search for Spirituality," focused on the varied ways Americans try to find God. It featured a gathering of five thousand Presbyterian women in Iowa and "creation-centered" ritualists in California. The follow-up program, called "Journey of the Heart," received a record number of viewer calls, requesting pursuit of spirituality in future programming.
- Last, a Gallup poll says that American people are impulsively groping for ways to mature in faith. 8 Americans in 10 wish a stronger faith. 3 persons in 4 would like to see religious beliefs play a greater role in people's lives. Christians name spiritual growth a top priority more often than Bible Study, supporting community causes, strengthening the local church, or influencing legislation.

Dynamic churches have what many people want—they just do not know that we have it. Worse, we have poorly shared this gospel treasure. The Bible calls what we hold by various names—pearl of great price, eternal life, Kingdom of Heaven, new wine, and hidden treasure. Our task, if we want to be vital believers, is to connect people's desire for meaningful life to the gospel. It supplies these needs.

Baptism means we are family. Even John baptized Jesus as a sign of solidarity. Baptism is a sign of solidarity among us, too. When one is in trouble, like a family, we are willing to help. As Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Alan Jones writes about the tears we share with brothers/sisters in faith. What Jones writes reminds us about what it means to follow Christ.

In fact, the gift of tears come relatively late in a person's walk with God. St. Gregory Nazianzen said that tears are the fifth baptism. The first is that of Moses—a matter of

simple water. The second is that of John the Baptist, which is greater than that of Moses because it is one of repentance. The third is the baptism of the Spirit. The fourth is baptism by blood in martyrdom, “which is the most perfect because Christ himself received it . . . Finally, there is that of tears, more painful than martyrdom because it consists nightly of bathing one’s bed and covers with tears”

Jones’ point is that those on the path of discipleship will recognize that it is the trek toward the cross. But in order to walk with Christ, we must answer the question: Who is Jesus? Who will tell us who Jesus is? Another task is to tell our young people and others in this community who Jesus is. But in order to do that we must first attend to our first task, which is to answer for ourselves who Jesus is. Mark’s Gospel tells us from beginning to end: “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ ” (Mark 1:11).

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