

**Worship Service for First Congregational UCC, Eagle River
December 6, 2020
Interim Pastor: L. Gail Irwin**

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, ’”

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

Sermon

- I. Nobody really likes John the Baptist. He makes us uncomfortable!
 - a. He wears itchy camel hair clothing
 - b. He eats bugs
 - c. He calls people “broods of vipers” and says everyone needs to repent or they’ll be thrown into an unquenchable fire! Who wants to hear this stuff?

- II. And yet, people went out to the wilderness to hear him speak about a “baptism of repentance”.
 - a. John had some emotionally painful news: ***You are all sinners;***
 - b. But it came with powerful medicine, spiritual medicine to heal people who were excluded and abused by their culture.
 - c. That medicine was good news: ***You are all redeemable!***
 - d. He told about a God who wanted to heal them, make them whole; so they went to hear him tell good news; and they accepted it with the bad
 - e. Some people, mainly religious leaders, didn’t like John’s news
 - i. they didn’t like John talking about a God who would redeem the outcast;
 - f. So they silenced him; he was arrested, thrown in prison and beheaded;
 - g. In this tragic way, he was a forerunner to Christ, who also came bearing news that was good for some and bad for others; and who also was silenced on a cross;
 - h. I guess it’s not safe to be the bearer of news, good or bad!

- III. Mark’s Gospel begins with an interesting phrase that jumped out at me this year:
“The beginning of the good news”

- a. That suggests it's only one part of a larger "good news" story we will hear later
- b. Or also that good news doesn't come all at once, but it's something that, once it starts, keeps coming!

Today is the day we light the candle of Peace on the Advent wreath; so let's talk about peace in light of John's good and bad news:

IV. What is peace for you?

- a. A peaceful walk in the woods, with no guilt about how lucky you are compared to other people around the world?
- b. Is it a reconciliation with a family member, even if you have to apologize?
- c. Is it an end to the war in Afghanistan, even if women still have no rights there?
- d. Peace is complicated, isn't it!
- e. If we're honest, real peace comes with both good news and bad news: we all want world peace! But to get it, something has to change, and it's usually us.

V. This has not been a good year for the cause of peace

- a. There are all the usual hot spots of conflict around the globe,
- b. But just within our own borders we've seen heightened conflict;
- c. One of the most uncomfortable moments in our nation this year was last May when we watched footage of a police officer in Minneapolis (Derek Chauvin) literally killing a black man (George Floyd) on camera, with several people watching.
- d. That event disturbed our supposed peace and drove people out of quarantine to protest police brutality in cities and even smaller towns around the country.
 - i. They came out to announce, like John the Baptist, the **bad news** that we are still a racist nation;
 - ii. But also: the **good news** that more of us are beginning to care about how we treat each other in this country.
 - 1. *The beginning of the good news*
 - iii. Before that day, the quarantine felt almost peaceful to me in my comfortable bubble. I was safe there.
 - iv. But that one event made me and many white people suddenly more aware of violence perpetrated against unarmed people of color every day,
 - v. It made household names of people like Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Jacob Blake of Kenosha
 - vi. It caused us to hear from people of color about what it's like to live day to day in an atmosphere of being mistrusted or feared in your own neighborhood because of the color of your skin.
 - vii. It made many of us in the white community realize that the "peace" disturbed this summer was not peace at all, but just our own insulation from the violent atmosphere a lot of people in our country live in, especially black people.
 - viii. For the first time, we had to ask ourselves why the phrase "Black Lives Matter" makes us so uncomfortable.

- VI. The violence and anger we saw this summer is really just a small battle in an internal war our nation has been fighting with itself over decades and centuries.
- a. Throughout American history, we've found ways to insulate ourselves from people who are different from us and relied on the threat of violence to keep some groups quiet and "in their place".
 - b. It can be argued that America has made a lot of progress toward greater peace between the races, but fear and hate are slow burning embers that will keep igniting again and again until we work out our racism issues.
- VII. How do Christians respond to a world that seems farther from peace than ever?
- a. Some of us try to look away; after all, there aren't very many black people in Eagle River; maybe this doesn't concern us.
 - b. Some of us find hope in Martin Luther King's observation that "*the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*"
 - c. We look back at progress made in the past and trust that God is still moving the world in the right direction, little by little.
 - d. But some people pay attention to what's happening right now, even when it makes them uncomfortable;
 - e. They reflect seriously on the deeper level of violence and sin in our country that affords some people far more privileges than others, just based on skin color or social class.
 - i. Some people hear the prophet's word of judgment or comfort, listening for both good news and bad news;
 - ii. And if we are the ones in need of a baptism of repentance, we figure out ways to learn and change our own behavior, trusting that we have a God who may still redeem us when we repent.
 - iii. For the moral arc to bend, we need to be part of the bending!
- VIII. I hope you have found a way to educate yourself more about racism this year;
- a. We could do an adult study on race issues if you haven't done one lately;
 - b. At least we should be freshly aware that we don't live in an all white community at all; we live on land that once belonged to brown skinned people, who were here long before we were. And we have a long road ahead of figuring out how to make amends for everything we've robbed from Native America.
- IX. But the peace that God envisions coming is not something that can be achieved this year, this decade or this century. It is a slow build.
- a. Listen to the prophet Isaiah's words from Chapter 40 as he dreams of peace:

*Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
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.*

We've heard this so many times, but what's he talking about? He's talking about peace as **building a road** that everybody can travel, with bridges across the valleys and mountains levelled to be passable by everyone, from the elderly disabled to little babies.

- b. This poetic image tells us that *peace is not a destination we will get to eventually*. It's a road we're building every day.
 - c. It's not a peaceful walk in the woods.
 - d. It's a long, hard road that requires something strenuous from us:
 - e. It's the day to day slog of building peace: asking hard questions, breaking down barriers between our neighbors; speaking honestly; questioning our own assumptions; sharing our own power and privilege with those who have less; amplifying the voices of people who haven't been heard, even when their message, like John the Baptist's, makes us uncomfortable.
- X. God has always been inviting us to travel this road, since he freed the Hebrews from slavery. God knows it's going to take a long time.
- a. But for every generation, it's up to us to build a road that is a little less bumpy than the one left by our ancestors;
 - b. The goal is a world, or a nation, or even just one town where everyone is treated with equal dignity and human rights...where everyone is redeemable!
 - c. I haven't been in Eagle River long, but I'm guessing you're not there yet.
 - d. That's the kind of peace Christians pursue.
- XI. We're not going to make it to the Promised Land tomorrow;
- a. But every day, we should each be doing something, learning something, risking or imagining something that gets the world closer to Christ's reign.
 - b. We're "building the road as we walk on it";
 - c. And if you're not helping to build that road, get out of the way, because this is God's road, God's journey.
 - d. God will get there eventually, with us or without us.
 - e. That's the beginning of the good news!