

WE HEAR GOD'S WORD

Our Reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark Chapter 1, verses 1-

13. Now it is ironic, as we start the New Year, that we would begin with what Scholars believe is the Oldest "Gospel." Best estimates, because there is no clear cut evidence, have Mark's Gospel being written just after Roman Legions destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, which was the final result of a four year Jewish Revolt against Roman control of the region. As the other Gospels of Luke, Matthew, and eventually John also appeared over the remainder of that century, it is believed that this event, the sacking of Jerusalem by Rome, triggered a reaction among the early Christians that made it imperative to get the story of Christ written down, so it could be more freely shared. In the midst of Bad Times, chaotic times, uncertain times...the early Christians wanted to share this Good News about what God was doing to save us all from the certainties of death and suffering, of war and political and economic abuses...which ultimately have their roots in the broken and human condition of sin.

It was a way, also, of theologically wrestling with the events of their times (which in many ways were no different than our own times) in light of the Revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. You see every generation is in need of Repentance. As I said earlier: Sin is inevitable...it defines the human condition. But...more importantly...every generation needs to hear the story that there is a way

out of what seems to be an inevitable hell...and that Way is through Jesus Christ...and this is what we acknowledge when we are baptized *into Christ Jesus*.

Salvation in Christ, then, is as much about our lives now, as it is about our lives in eternity. And the Gospel message of repentance and salvation defines that very statement. The Gospel is a life altering, life changing, and life giving message in the midst of a world that so often seems bent on dealing us nothing but sin and death.

Brothers and Sisters who are in Christ Jesus...listen now to the Word of our Lord from the Gospel of Mark:

“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.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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.

And a voice came from heaven,

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

The word of God for the People of God...Thanks be to God

You know the after party is usually not very glamorous. I have to confess first hand knowledge of this because I made the miscalculation my sophomore year of college of agreeing to live at the Fraternity house with one of my good friends. I saw a lot of after parties that year, and I'll spare you all the details...but lets just say it was not attractive.

But, that seems to be the nature of exciting and fun events...they make the after effect seem unattractive...maybe a little bland or dull...almost like a let down. You can plan for days or weeks or months for an exciting event: a big party or a vacation...and BOOM...once its over...all that is left is the mess you have to clean up, and the slow realization that its not there to look forward to anymore.

I wonder sometimes if we haven't done that to Christmas in our culture? Now, don't get me wrong, I am a sucker for Christmas time. Besides the over commercialization of it, I love everything about it. The decorations, the music, the presents, the get togethers and parties, the old movies, the Scriptures, and the worship services. It is a rich, rich time of year.

But at the end of the season...after all the hoopla is over...what are you left with? **January**...traditionally, the coldest month of the year: bare trees, brown grass, back to school, back to work, and oh yeah... let's don't forget the hangover of credit card debt. It's kind of like the after party, and it probably bums a lot of us out.

So the question is...do we hype this event of Christmas too much? Do we make it such a big time of year in our culture, in our churches, in our homes...that once it actually passes, are we left with the dull thought that what follows is rather bland?...that

we have nothing really to look forward to so the days and weeks that come after are just going about business as usual.

Personally, I don't think that's what God wants for our lives. I think, that God wants every day for us to have meaning and purpose...and I think that God, by His grace and Spirit is calling us constantly towards that meaning and purpose.

Do you remember how Jesus called each of his disciples? Well...he did not call his disciples in the midst of some great fanfare...in the midst of some great event...he met them right where they lived and worked and said come and follow me. **He gave them meaning and purpose not outside of their ordinary lives, but right in the midst of their ordinary lives.**

So I would argue, that the after time of Christmas, the after point of our celebration of Christ coming into our world, is not a let down at all. I would argue that the after time of Christmas is an opportunity to begin things anew...to recommit our lives in service and to the glory of God, and in service and care for each other.

Now, imagine....waking up tomorrow and saying to yourself...today I am going to have the discipline to keep developing my relationship with God. Therefore, I am going to pray, and I am going to read some Scripture. I'm not going to set a long winding schedule of how I will read the Bible in a year, unless that is what motivates you, but I

am going to read something. The PCUSA has a website with the lectionary readings right on it...you can even have them emailed to you each day if that makes it more convenient. For the next few months it will take you through Mark's Gospel, parts of Paul's letters, and some really interesting Old Testament readings.

Maybe, instead, and this is what I do often, you will say to yourself I am going to read 2nd Peter, because honestly, I don't have a clue what is in that little Epistle. And maybe, when you sit down and read it and you find yourself confused about a particular passage...you'll go to your pastor or your Sunday School teacher or your friends and ask... "what's up with this line right here?" And maybe if you do this type of study with your pastor or your Sunday School teacher or your friend, they will offer you some amazing, life changing insight into the depth of that passage...OR...if you come to your pastor he will probably cop out and give you a really neat Commentary he read in seminary with somebody else's amazing and life changing insight into the depth of that passage. **And you might chuckle...but I can personally assure you, with every fiber of my being, that the reading and study of Scripture will literally change your life in ways that you cannot fathom...and it is right there waiting for you to pick it up tomorrow morning.**

Now, does that sound like an after party kind of day to you? Not to me...that sounds pretty exciting. Life altering, life changing words just sitting on the shelf waiting for us to grab hold of it... and it can all begin tomorrow.

How about this...imagine, waking up tomorrow, and saying: Today I am going to look for new ways that I can seek to follow Christ more faithfully **by reaching outside of myself and into the brokenness of those that I see around me by loving them as much as I love myself.** And when I wonder how I can possibly make a difference in other people's lives and in this world, I think about Jesus Christ, who is my model, who had nothing but the clothes on his back, a pair of sandals on his feet, **an absolute complete lack of fear that God would fail Him when he needed it,... and no question that God's will for his life was better than his own.** And, then perhaps we can say to ourselves, **let's take it one step at a time, make the best of what we got, and leave the results...and the glory up to God.**

Now, does that sound like an after party kind of day to you? It doesn't to me...it sounds exciting and adventurous...stepping out on faith and waiting to see how God will use you to make a difference in His world. And it can all begin tomorrow morning right smack in the middle of the Post Christmas, January duldrums.

So you might be asking yourself...what in the world does all this have to do with our reading from Mark's Gospel? Well...Jesus must have had some kind of an ordinary life because the Oldest Gospel doesn't even take the time to mention what happened until he was almost 30 years old. In fact none of the Gospels give us any kind of clue into Jesus' early life, which came right after the all the AMAZING EVENTS of his birth... except the one story about Him teaching at the temple when He was just a boy. Think about that...the Son of God, God made flesh, lived on this earth for almost 30 years and was basically...a complete unknown.

And then one day... he walks down from Galilee and into the River Jordan, and John lays him down deep down into that water and when He comes out the HEAVENS are torn apart, the Spirit descends upon him, God's voice speaks... and a ministry is begun. And this is no ordinary ministry...this is a life altering, life changing ministry that has been written and spoken about for almost 2,000 years and is known and admired, in some fashion, in almost every corner of this world.

So let me ask you this:

Do you think for one minute that God is not capable of entering right smack dab in the middle of your life no matter what stage it might be in?

Do you think for one minute that God is not ready to meet you in the middle of the most ordinary of circumstances and tear open the heavens and empower you with His Spirit?

Do you think for one second that God is not on the cusp of breaking into the duldrums of a January morning and changing the course of your life forever?

If you don't...then go back and read the Gospel of Mark chapter 1, verses 1-13.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
