

“The Way of the Lord”

December 6, 2020

Mark 1

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. I have been reading a book of Advent devotions by Dietrich Bonhoeffer entitled “God is in the Manger”. As a reminder: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of our greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians. He was born to and raised by middle class German parents; his father was a psychiatrist and neurologist and his mother was a teacher and painter. He graduated from Berlin University and studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York before becoming ordained in the German Lutheran Church and teaching theology at the University of Berlin. Opposing the rise of Nazism in Germany, Bonhoeffer became a leader in the Resistance/Confessing Church Movement and was eventually arrested by Hitler’s Nazi party and sent to the concentration camps. One of the devotionals in his book “God is in the Manger” is entitled “Waiting Is an Art” and I wanted to share a portion of it with you.

“Celebrating Advent means being able to wait. Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. We rush to break open the ripe fruit when it has hardly finished planting the shoot. But all too often our greedy eyes are only deceived; the fruit that seemed so precious is still green on the inside, and

disrespectful hands ungratefully toss aside what has so disappointed them.

Whoever does not know the blessedness of waiting – that is, of hopefully doing without – will never experience the full blessing of fulfillment. Those who do not know how it feels to struggle anxiously with the deepest questions of life, of their life, and to patiently look forward with anticipation until the truth is revealed, cannot even dream of the splendor of the moment in which clarity is illuminated for them. For the greatest, most profound, tenderest things in the world, we must wait.”

We must wait. And there is so much for us to learn in our waiting. It is a holding place for us to be reflective and introspective; to discover or perhaps re-discover values which the world scorns, but our faith lifts up. We must wait – for clarity, for understanding, for love, for renewal, for birth.

As we wait for the birth of Jesus Christ in our world, our reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s gospel is the first account of the life of Jesus which was written and preserved for us in the New Testament scriptures. It was written about 65 CE by, probably a Jewish Christian. Someone who was raised in the Jewish faith and had knowledge of the Jewish scriptures, but who became a follower of Jesus as the Christ, Son of God. The beginning of the story of Jesus, according to Mark, does not begin with the birth of Jesus, but with the ministry of John the Baptist. As we come to God’s word to us from the Gospel of Mark, let us first come to God in prayer.

Prayer for Understanding: God of good news, who sent John as a messenger to people of his day and who speaks to us in the words and actions of all the saints of all the ages, open us now to receive what we most need to hear. And in hearing, may we become change agents, resourcing others who are looking for meaning and hope in their lives.

Amen

Read Mark 1: 1-8

This past week someone shared with me an experience they had with their four-year-old son as his family was decorating their home for Christmas. They had pulled all the Christmas decorations out of the attic and they were going through the boxes as Christmas music was playing in the background. Their four-year-old began to ask a litany of questions, as four-year olds tend to do. “Daddy, why do we put so many lights on the Christmas tree? What do all these colors mean? Why do you cut branches off the tree and hang them on the door? Why do you bring a tree in the house? Mommy is going to be mad when she sees all this mess.”

Father and son listened to the Christmas music for a while in silence. And then another question: “Daddy, what does ignore mean?” The father explained, “Ignore means not to pay attention to people when they speak to you.” Immediately the little boy looked at his father and commented, “I don’t think we should ignore Jesus.” Puzzled, the father knelt closer to his son and replied, “I don’t think we should ignore Jesus either. I

think we need to give him our full attention. Why do you say we ignore him?" The son replied: "That is what the Christmas song says, Oh, come let us ignore him."

John the Baptist certainly will not allow us to ignore Jesus.

Every advent of our lives, we have to travel close to John the Baptist to get to Jesus as we journey to Bethlehem. John the Baptist, wearing weird clothes and shouting, "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand." He is the last person some of us want to see or pay attention to, myself included.

When I was a student at Vanderbilt University, every spring we had a traveling preacher who would stake out a place in front of the student center, turn a wooden box upside down and climb on it. We had to pass by him in order to get to the bookstore or the dining hall. In fact, there was no way to get around him. He would shout at us about the coming of the end times. He would demand to know if we were ready for the coming of Christ. And he would scream that we all were sinners in need of forgiveness. He was a crazy man, dressed in somewhat bizarre clothing. He seemed to me to be a flesh and blood duplicate of John the Baptist.

Some of us would go to great lengths to avoid him and his call to repentance. Over the years, the Vanderbilt traveling preacher and John the Baptist's hellfire and damnation brand of Christianity has been used to threaten us, scold us, punish us, and just plain frighten us, until most of us would like to simply ignore them.

But there is no getting around John. He shows up every Advent. He is God's appointed messenger, sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. And the Lord

is coming, not to host a tea party but to chop and to burn. He is coming to separate the trees that grow good fruit from those that are dead wood. The Lord is coming is judge who is on the side of life and who is not, so that the good wheat can get on with the business of feeding a starving world. He will judge between those who are *on* the way and those who are *in* the way as he clears his way through the world, and all of us shall know ourselves for who we are.

Unlike my Vanderbilt traveling preacher, John preaches that with the judgment comes an invitation of grace. We can choose to ignore the Lord, choose other priorities, fear the judgment or run away from the Lord. Or we can say yes, here I am, see me the way I really am, tell me the whole truth about myself, refine me, transform me, baptize me with the Holy Spirit. The judgment and the grace are two sides of the same coin. It is through God's judgment that we experience grace and new life.

John the Baptist was not afraid to speak the truth with love. On this second Sunday of Advent, we cannot get around John. His invitation for repentance is also an invitation to receive the grace of the one who comes after John. Advent means beginning. It is an opportunity for us to truly look at our lives, examine our priorities, confess our limitations and know that God loves us, so much so that he comes to us in human form. Judgment is finally not about our goodness, but about God's goodness and mercy. God does not need much in the way of raw materials - not a chest full of merit badges, a clean conscience or an unsullied reputation. All God needs to create a human being is a handful of dust willing to be transformed, willing to be caught on fire for

heaven's sake. John the Baptist calls us all to examine our hearts and minds and to recognize the destructive powers that try to claim us and shape us.

Let's not ignore Jesus during this Advent season. Let's not try to get around John. Maybe his message of repentance is the way for us to clean out our own closets and put our houses in order so that the Lord might come and be at home with us.