

Christ, the World and the Kingdom

Psalm 27

Matthew 4: 12-23

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 22, 2017

For the last two Sundays, the assigned lectionary readings told the back story of Jesus life and ministry. The first reported Jesus' baptism. The second focused on John the Baptist's testimony that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of world.

Today's scripture breaks the gospel narrative's continuity by skipping over the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, which happened immediately after his baptism and goes straight into the first day of his ministry.

For the time being, the lectionary asks us to put the temptation story on the back burner until the first Sunday in Lent. Even so, today it would be helpful to briefly address the implications of Christ's temptation in the context of his baptism.

Immediately after emerging from the water, Jesus heard the voice of his heavenly father declare, "You are my beloved son in you I am well pleased."

At that moment, God affirmed his son's decision to be baptized, or ordained, to be the suffering Christ.

But there was a price to be paid. Jesus knew when this mystical experience lifted, he would have to learn how to live with the consequences of his baptism. That explains why the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. There he would be tested before recommitting his life to a calling he knew would end on a cross.

Sharing in our human nature, you can appreciate Jesus having second thoughts. After counting the cost, it made more sense to become what everyone expected, a triumphant Messiah adored by his subjects instead of a suffering Messiah nobody wanted.

Thankfully for us, despite being rendered weak and vulnerable, Jesus resisted the devil's assaults and resubmitted to God's will before setting his face towards Jerusalem.

After overcoming this first test, Jesus headed towards the territory of Zebulun and Naph'ta-li, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy,

Land of Zebulan, land of
Naph'tal-li,
on the Road by the sea, across the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles...
The people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,

And for those who sat in
the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:1-2)

These regions in Galilee are portrayed as places of darkness because the people who lived there gave up hope and gave into despair. All the more reason for Jesus to begin his ministry where hardship was the greatest and morale dangerously low. Wasting no time, Jesus jumped in with both feet proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The phrase, “the kingdom of heaven has come near” or “the Kingdom of God is at hand” is found multiple times in the scriptures but what does it really mean?

Sometimes, it seems like a tease. God is just around the corner. Just be patient. God will come when he’s ready. For now, grin and bear it. Someday everything will be put to rights, maybe not today or next week but someday.

This was the misconception the Jews lived with as they waited for the Messiah to stampede in and make things right. This is the same misconception we still live with as we wait for Christ’s second coming to save us from our confusing and dangerous world.

Far from being a tease, Jesus’ promise of the coming kingdom of heaven is filled with hope. What is hope? The biblical concept of hope shouldn’t be confused with wishful thinking. On the contrary, to hope means remembering God’s faithful track record in the past and trusting God will continue sustaining us now and in the future.

Take a page from personal experience. We can all remember going through hard stretches in the past. You may have been devastated because life as you knew it was unceremoniously put to death. And yet from the perspective of the present, you can look back and see that out of your pain and suffering, God gave birth to something new.

Both the Old and New Testaments point to God’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth, a radical renewal not only of human life but the creation as well. This renewal has already been put in motion. Immediately after Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, God began the process of working out his plan for our salvation through the patriarchs, the prophets and later the apostles. But the most momentous unveiling of his grand design to rescue the creation from dysfunction and decay is revealed in the first coming of Christ.

When Jesus said, “the Kingdom of heaven has come near,” it wasn’t a tease but a statement of hope. Like the smoke emerging from burning incense in the temple, God’s presence fills the earth. What’s more, God not only owns the earth, God lives in it with us.

And to the the movers and shakers who think they run the world (and to some extent that includes all of us) Jesus says, “Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

We tend to think of earth and heaven as two separate entities. We live and die in this decaying world expecting to leave it behind for a brighter and better place. In the meantime, we

build our homes, tend to our careers and frantically pursue happiness, all the while doing everything we possibly can to minimize pain and suffering.

Of course, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with doing any of these things. God wants us to be prosperous and enjoy life. But being healthy, wealthy and wise investors in the good life isn't enough. There's more to life at stake and God wants to give it to us. "For God so loved the world he gave his only son..."

Jesus is God's anointed one, the personification of God's beauty.

In Psalm 27 we heard this request:

One thing I ask of the Lord...
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the
Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

The Jews believed the fullness of God permeated the temple, the epicenter of God's creation. It was holy ground. Why else would Jesus drive out the moneychangers shouting, "Stop making my father's house a marketplace!" When the temple officials demanded an explanation for his outrageous behavior, Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," thereby proclaiming himself to be the new temple of God.

The psalmist declared, "One thing I ask of the Lord, to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord."

Through Christ, the psalmist's prayer takes on a radical transformation. The old temple was a prototype of the creation where God sat on his throne. The new temple, raised up on the third day is Christ himself.

The temple in Jerusalem was believed to be a thin place, the doorway between heaven and earth. The temple the priests were the mediators between God and God's people by offering up sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. Above all, the temple was the conduit from which God's justice and peace flowed, filling the world with the fullness of God.

According to God's plan, all these activities are reassigned to his Christ, the mediator for our sins and the conduit from which the fullness of God flows. The promise of the new creation, heaven and earth becoming one in the kingdom of God has already begun through Christ and now continues through his Church.

As members of the church, the mystical body of Christ on earth, we are called into the priesthood to be mediators between heaven and earth. In effect, Christ's job description has become our job description. Our job as the priesthood of all believers is to continue what Christ began, telling all who would listen that the kingdom of heaven has come near through our words and deeds.

Bono, the lead singer of U2 once spoke at a prayer breakfast in Washington DC.

He said, “A number of years ago I met a wise man who changed my life. I was always seeking the Lord’s blessing. I was praying, ‘I have a new song, look after it. I have a family, look after them.’ And this wise man said to me, ‘Stop! Stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Instead, get involved in what God is doing because it’s already blessed.’”

If I may paraphrase John F Kennedy’s famous line from his inaugural address, “Ask not what God can do for you, ask what you can do for God’s kingdom.”

I’m hoping today’s scriptures and sermon are a good preparation for our annual Congregational meeting. You will be presented a budget, you will be told about the cost of maintaining our aging building. We will also address the considerable challenges we are facing as a small congregation in an increasingly secular world.

Important as these items are, these should not be our primary concerns. The most important question we can ask ourselves is this: What are we doing for God’s kingdom?

You’ve heard announcements, Minutes for Mission and even sermons about New Beginnings. A team of leaders in the congregation have been praying together and meeting together along with over seventy people in the surrounding communities to discern what God is calling us to do, in partnership with our neighbors, to increase quality of life in our neighborhood.

You’ll be hearing more about it during our congregational meeting so I’ll just say this for now. We believe we are on the verge of doing something concrete that will bring together people in the neighborhood, giving them an opportunity to have conversations and build relationships.

We also believe we can show our neighbors that we are a congregation that cares about the joys and concerns of people who are not members of our church.

Getting people together is only the first step. It’s our hope, (remember, hope isn’t wishful thinking but based on God’s faithfulness in the past) we can hope the Spirit of God will be moving people to take active roles in bringing justice, peace and light to those among us without friends and helpers to give them direction and hope.

Isn’t this what Jesus expected from his disciples? “Go out to the lost and confused people in your neighborhood and tell them the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick, raise the dead and kick out demons.”

That’s our job description. The Church, the Body of Christ, is meant to be a movement of believers, led by our Risen Lord who assures us, “Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world.”

The promise of the new creation, heaven coming down to earth is already happening. From the beginning, it was God's mission to rescue and redeem our decaying and dysfunctional world and everyone in it.

We have a choice. We can grumble as we wait for the Second Coming or we can wait by glorifying God through proactive waiting, becoming reflections of the light of Christ that shines away the darkness so the world can see the Kingdom of God coming near.

Of course before this can happen, Christ needs willing disciples to follow his lead and make sacrifices for the greater good.

Do we have the right stuff? We can hope we do. Just look back on the past and see evidence of God's people bearing witness to the fullness of God flooding the world with justice and peace.

God did it before and God will do it again, through us, if we let him.

Let us pray.