Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2017

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THE CURTAIN RISES Isaiah 40:1–11

 Mark 1:1–8

 “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Another possible translation goes like this: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah.”

 So begins the Gospel of Mark. Indeed, we find ourselves at a beginning, a new beginning, a beginning as important for the followers of Christ as the beginning recorded in Genesis Chapter 1: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.” God is about to do it once again, for the Gospel of Jesus Messiah signals a new heaven and a new earth.

 This is the only place in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus is identified as Gospel–Good News–and also the only place in the Gospel where Jesus is explicitly identified as the Messiah. We know these things, but those who were involved in the story did not know them until the very end of the story, only after Jesus had risen from the grave. We are in on the truth from the very beginning.

 But now comes the surprise, even for us who know that Jesus is the Gospel and the Messiah. The curtain rises on the story and what do we behold? We behold a wilderness. A wilderness—a place on the periphery; a place of survival; a place to which the persecuted flee; a place of marginal existence.

 The truth of the wilderness was brought home to me when I spent time in a Bedouin community in the desert just east of Jerusalem. The Bedouin community that I visited is part of the Jahalin Palestinian tribe. The Israeli government has done its best to rid the area of the Bedouin people in order to make room for more Jewish settlements. The struggle of the Bedouin to remain in the land where they have lived for centuries is heartrending and at the same time a testimony to their faith and courage. In the community we visited, we were told that the Israeli army had destroyed the cisterns that supplied the people with water, and so they were forced to import all their water. I will never forget my exposure to what it is like to live marginally in a desert wilderness.

 The curtain rises on the story of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah, and what we see is a wilderness. And we hear the promise of a messenger who will prepare in the wilderness the way for God. The promise echoes the words of Malachi, the last of the Hebrew prophets: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” (Malachi 3:1) But Mark has a different take. God will not appear in the temple but in the wilderness, just as God appeared in the wilderness centuries before to lead the Babylonian exiles home. They too heard

 *“ . . . the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

 *‘Prepare the way of the Lord,*

 *make his paths straight.’ “* (Mark 1:3)

 In this new beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Messiah, God will again appear in the wilderness, but why in the wilderness and not in the Jerusalem temple? Indeed, the people of Jerusalem will need to go out into the wilderness in order to make the path straight for the way of the Lord. They will need to be baptized by John in the river Jordan, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. They will need to turn themselves around, which is what repentance really means, in order to make themselves ready for the way of the Lord.

 But, again, why the wilderness? I like to think that it’s because God chooses not to appear in places of social and political power, but in places on the periphery, in places occupied by those who are poor and marginal, just like the Jahalin Bedouin people, in places where people instinctively know their need of God, in places where people yearn for justice and for peace. I have often thought that here in Hawai‘i, God probably would choose to appear not at the State Capitol but instead in lower Kalihi or on the Waianae Coast.

 If God chooses to appear among the poor and disenfranchised in the wilderness places rather than in the places of power, then perhaps it is also true for us. God will choose to come to us in the places of poverty and need, and that is where we will need to make the path straight for the way of the Lord. But here’s the thing—perhaps we ourselves are those who are marginalized and living on the edge of society rather than in its center. I must admit that this is how I am feeling these days. I feel that all that we have held as true and beautiful and just has been taken away from us, and that what we hold dear as Christians is no longer being honored in the places of social and political power. I have a feeling that you know what I mean. We ourselves have become the marginalized, and it just may be that God will be pleased to come to us, just as Jesus came to the poor and marginalized of Galilee.

 If there is some truth in this, then the implications are far ranging. On a very personal level, it means that it is only as we acknowledge our need for God that God will come to us in Jesus who is both Gospel and Messiah, both good news and the Christ. It is only as we identify ourselves as marginal and in need that God will come to us.

 As for us as church, let us no longer lament that we are not honored in the places of power. Let’s remember that neither was Jesus honored in the seats of power in his own time and place. He found his home among the outcast, the poor, and the marginalized, and it may just be that he will find a place among us also. The Christmas story serves as a commentary on the ministry and mission of Jesus. We recall that his mother was just a poor, young, unwed mother. He was born in an animal shed because there was no room in the inn. He was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for cattle, “rude and bare” as the carol says. Poor shepherds visited the manger, and the wise men who visited him came from a place outside the mainstream of power and influence.

 So, my friends, it is perfectly all right that we find ourselves on the margins of society. Also, let us imagine the implications for our own ministry and mission. We now have an opportunity, knowing that we ourselves are a marginal people, to be in solidarity with those whose marginality is clearly visible: the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the oppressed, the battered, the sick—all whose need is evident. We need no longer approach these, our sisters and brothers, with a paternalistic attitude. We now are more able to be in loving solidarity with them, knowing ourselves what it means to live without honor in our world.

 The curtain rises, and we behold a wilderness. We can see ourselves living in such a wilderness, and there we can acknowledge our own kind of exile, our own need for the presence of God in our lives. And we can hear the voice, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.”

As Ched Myers says in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark: “what is being forged is no mere path; a new way of life is being built in the shell of the old world.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We surely want to see that new path; but not only that, we want to be a part of it. We want to do what we can to make the path straight. So, my brothers and sisters, let us continue to uphold the values we have discovered in Jesus the Christ, the values we confess to be right and true. Let us give thanks to God for our newfound identity as people of the Way, even if it guarantees our marginality. Let us love one another, forgive one another, uphold one another and be in solidarity with the poor, the homeless, the hungry, and the oppressed of our world. Let us be doers of justice and makers of peace. Let us trade social acceptance by the powerful for faithfulness in the sight of God. And let us, in the wilderness places of our lives, never cease to pray for that new heaven and that new earth God grants us in the One who will soon be born once again among us. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1. Ched Myers:, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988) 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)