

December 10, 2017

(Mark 1: 1- 8)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

John the Baptist was born into a priestly family, and may well have been disillusioned enough with organized religion to set up in opposition out in his deserts. He really was in opposition. If you can repent and have your sins forgiven way out there in the waters of the Jordan, who needs 'the blood of bulls and of goats' that the control freaks in the Temple want you to buy? How far 'out there somewhere' are we prepared to risk going as God's faithful servants today?

With John the Baptist's building upon Isaiah, Luke's gospel shows us how we all need to move on from facts of history to what we *do* with history, how we live it out. Isaiah, John the Baptist, and then Jesus himself expect us to live out our faith in the God of history, the One whose paths we are to 'make straight'.

What are on our list of paths that need to be made straight? What are your valleys that need filling in? Mountains and hills that need to be brought low? What is crooked in your life that needs to be made straight? Rough that needs to be smoothed? Try rephrasing the questions: WHO....who are the paths...and valleys...and the mountains. Who are the hills, and the crookedness and roughness that need to be made ready for God's coming?

I am sure that I could be on that list somewhere, especially when I pause to reflect that God comes in you, and in you, and you and you. What if you find not something else, not someone else, but *ME* needing straightening, filling in, lowering, or smoothing because I am blocking your way to God and therefore God's way to you! That is, blocking God's rule from happening right here and now, never mind there and then!

How concerned are we that all human beings shall 'see the salvation of God'? Do we have any real understanding of what that means, let alone whether we want it to happen, not only for those in our church circles, but even those who do not come into any church circle? People who do not come, do not want to come, don't see why they should come and let themselves be locked in behind the lines we draw in our churches, our rule books, our interpretations of God and of God's rule?

Some years ago, the theme of our diocesan convention was "Your Kingdom Come". We pray for that here every Sunday, and many of us throughout the week as well..."Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And Bishop Adams touched upon this in detail during his homily at that convention.

He came across two layouts in a popular magazine. The first advertisement portrayed the words "True Religion" written in script at the bottom of the page below an attractive couple. The second ad spanned two pages. It read, "When all is said and done, have you done or said enough?"

Have you just gone along for the ride, or have you steered destiny's hot rod? When you leave this world, did you make it any better than it was when you arrived? All you need is all you've got: your wits and the clothes on your back, your epitaph is yours to earn, your legacy is yours to make." And then in much larger bold letters, "GO FORTH."

The first referred to True Religion as a brand of jeans. The second was a spread advertising Levi's brand of jeans. We could shake our heads in disgust that such religious themes are being co-opted by two blue jean companies as a marketing tool. We could also choose to see these marketing tools as one more indication of the erosion of the culture and its deepening secularization. Or...one could see these examples as a call to the faith community to reclaim its own call to be a witness of "true religion" which the Letter of James says is "...to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." In other words, our practice of religion is to recognize ourselves called out to live a life of holiness and make a difference in the life of others, especially the downtrodden and marginalized. Levi's seems to have a take on that. What of you and me?

Perhaps there is even something more going on here. What if, when you and I are so bold to pray as Jesus taught us, "Your kingdom come," God is actually answering that prayer, all the time, right in our midst, everywhere? What if the showing up of hints of the Gospel, right in blue jean ads, is a sign, however small, of the Kingdom of God revealed in the most unexpected places, seeking to break in and take root? Who cares where it comes from, but can we name it and build upon it ourselves? Better yet, do we REALLY want God to answer that prayer..."Your kingdom come"? Is not that reality...our reluctance to joyfully engage the transformation of the world by God, our tendencies to just mouth the words and not transform our lives to match...the focus of the readings for today, and all of Advent?

It is not news to us that most in the so-called mainline faith traditions are struggling. Much of it is cultural over which we have little control, and our response to this "out-of-control-ness" is no different than most people's in that we get afraid, grumble, and get dissatisfied. With the temptation to withdraw and become even more isolated from one another which only fragments us and causes more fear and more dissatisfaction.

In that light, we often have heard people talk about our situation using the Titanic story line, asking an opinion if the Church is going to survive. But what if, as the author Diana Butler-Bass says, the Titanic is not our story? What if the better story is that of another ship, the Mayflower? "...a boat of pilgrims finds itself in uncharted seas, blown off course by a storm and heading for an unnamed country. Like the Titanic story there is a sense of urgency, confusion and fear, but the ship is still intact. The leaders are not loading lifeboats, they are looking for land while they navigate the choppy and unfamiliar seas. In the Titanic story, leaders lead while the ship is sinking. In the Mayflower story, leaders stabilize a pilgrim community as they head into an unknown world. Is the story a crisis or an adventure? Titanic or Mayflower? We get to make some choices.

So, what if all that we are dealing with is in fact a sign of the kingdom breaking in? No one, including Jesus and the prophets, said that it would be painless or easy. In fact, we are told often that it will not look like what we expect. The first will be last. The meek will inherit the earth. Who would have known? How do we cooperate with God as best we know how by participating in the in-breaking of the kingdom for which we pray all the time....“your kingdom come?”

For us, the question is not about denominational survival. The crucial question is: will we first seek the kingdom? Then everything will be added unto us. But do we really want that?

The kingdom has come and is coming even now, even as our own efforts often fall short. We are a mixture of belief and unbelief, anxiety and assuredness, saint and sinner, acceptance and rejection, love and hate. Yet we and the whole creation are in a process of becoming what God would have us be. When we pray “your kingdom come” we are saying that this very moment is part of a larger picture. This moment is important, but it does not exist in isolation. In reality, this moment is a part of eternity and participates in it. Our prayer is being answered, even as we sit here, and whether we really like it, or not.

Repentance is something we do from sin, but part of the problem with contemporary culture and with mainline Christianity as a whole, is that we do not think we need to repent because we do not sin. The theologian and storyteller John Shea wrote: “If sin is understood as any thought, deed or disposition that breaks the flow of life between God and ourselves, or ourselves and others or the earth itself, then a different picture of the desire for forgiveness presents itself. Perhaps people wake up one day and find that there is no ‘life’ in their lives. The passion, pleasure, and purpose of what they do and who they are is no longer there. They go through the paces and fulfill their duties, but there is something wrong. Although they still fight for money and position, they know the payoff will not be all that it promises...Although they may not be able to list their sins, this is a sinful condition. The flow of life has dried up and they want out. It is often said that the longing for liberation begins when you notice that you are in prison.”

In this new season of Advent, of anticipation for the Risen and Holy One, it is well past time for us to quit asking God for what God already knows we want or need, and it is well past time to start asking God to help us catch up with his world around us, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.