New Beginnings

The Second Sunday of Advent: December 10, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

2 Peter 3:8-15a (NRSV)
But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. 11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)
The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
Our gospel reading this morning begins at the beginning: of Mark’s gospel, that is: But what Mark is telling us is that this is the beginning of more than just this book of the New Testament. It’s “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” “Good news” of course, is also translated “gospel”. Good news is in short supply in our world, and always has been. For that reason it has always been something people rejoiced in. There’s a wonderful verse in the Book of Proverbs, Proverbs 25:25, that puts it this way: “Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.” Being thirsty is something we can all relate to. To have been working hard for a long time outside on a hot Richmond summer day, and then to have a drink of cold water! For me, that perfectly captures the thirst we can have for good news. The good news Mark is talking about is “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Whether they know it or not, all human beings are thirsty for the good news in Jesus. What makes Jesus’ coming such good news is that in Jesus God gives us the opportunity for new beginnings.

The opportunity for a new beginning is something we all need—not just us, but every human being. A poet name Louisa Fletcher, who led a particularly unhappy life, put it this way in the first few lines of her poem, “The Land of Beginning Again”:

I wish that there were some wonderful place
In the Land of Beginning Again.
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
and never put on again.¹

In Christ, God has created a land of beginning again. God starts with his chosen people, the people of Israel. They were visited around the year 25 by John the Baptist. But of course, the good news of a new beginning isn’t new with John. It was prophesied by Isaiah some 700 years before. Mark quotes 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.’” In our reading from Isaiah the Lord says that Jerusalem and the Jewish people will become the people who announce his new beginning in Christ to the whole world: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

¹ http://www.davidlose.net/2013/05/the-land-of-beginning-again/
See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.” (Isaiah 40:9-10) So God has chosen the Jewish people to be “the herald of good tidings,” of good news of a new beginning to all peoples.

But the good news John is announcing doesn’t sound very good to our modern ears. He is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And people are coming to him to be baptized in the River Jordan after they confess their sins—publicly. This is really amazing. If I were to go down to the Pony Pasture at the James River and begin calling on people to repent and be baptized, and publicly confess their sins, how many takers do you think I’d get? Yet we’re told “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” It’s like the lunch rush at Chick-fil-A.

When I go to Chick-fil-A I’m always amazed at the people who are lined up to order and to pay. It’s a fantastically successful business. Isn’t it the dream of every business owner to have people lined up with money in their hand waiting to hand it over? Yet here we have John preaching a stern message of repentance and public confession of sin. And crowds of people are lining up to be baptized and publicly confess their sins. Why was there such an overwhelming response?

Two reasons. First, unlike us, John’s audience had a national history of occupation and oppression. The Jewish people were and still are God’s chosen people. But 600 years earlier the Lord had deported them to Babylon for 70 years because of their sins. The first 2 verses of our Old Testament reading are the Lord’s words of comfort to them as he promises the end of their captivity. His intent was to discipline his people, not destroy them. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” Though they had been allowed to return 500 years before John began to preach, God’s punishment was part of their national identity. Now they were under the oppressive rule of another foreign power, the Romans. The result is that John has an audience who are acutely aware that they are vulnerable to God’s judgment. They are ready to repent of their sins, and to be baptized by him.

The second reason is that John’s ministry is the beginning of a new beginning in human history—starting with the Jewish people. God himself, in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, has come to earth to grant salvation to all who turn to him in faith. When John preached, God’s Holy Spirit moved among the Jewish people to draw them to John’s baptism and to Jesus. John’s ministry is a new beginning for the people of Israel as they are baptized in the River Jordan, the same river their ancestors crossed as they came into the Promised Land centuries before under Joshua. In other words, through John God is giving the Jewish people the opportunity for a new beginning, a land of beginning again.
The new beginning for John’s Jewish audience is the new beginning for the whole human race in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus will accept God’s wrath and the judgment we all deserve when he dies on the cross. Our part is to hear John’s call to repent. That is, to change the way we think and behave. We must every day repent of depending on ourselves and depend instead on God and his great goodness in Jesus Christ. As Peter says in our reading this morning, God doesn’t want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

After his death for our sins, Jesus rose glorious from the dead. He is the prototype for the new humanity with which God will populate the new earth Peter talks about in our reading this morning. Jesus is a new beginning for the whole creation. Jesus is the land of beginning again. This indeed is good news! And to us who put our trust in this great good news he gives his Holy Spirit. We have access to the Father in authentic prayer. He speaks to us through the Holy Spirit as we read and study his Word. We have his grace and power to live as he would have us and to tell others the great good news. We have the deep assurance of eternal life in a transformed world of joy and splendor.

I’d like to touch briefly on the new beginning we are in the process of making at St. Matthew’s. Some time next year someone will answer God’s call to become your next rector. But that’s not the new beginning I’m referring to. I’m talking about the new beginning all mainline Protestant churches in the United States are being called to make.

Membership and attendance in churches is declining across denominations. At the same time, the numbers of people who check “none” when they answer questions about their religious affiliation are growing rapidly as a percentage of the population. In 2007, they were 16%. Only seven years later, in 2014 they had grown to 23%. Today these “nones” are probably 25% of the population.

To use John the Baptist’s ministry as an example, his audience was a Jewish people afraid of God’s judgment, who were moved to come to him in droves as a group. In years past, St. Matthew’s audience has been people seeking a church home, people who were looking for Christian teaching and fellowship, and they came to us and filled our pews. This is no longer the case. More and more people in our culture aren’t interested in church as we know it and have always practiced it.

But this doesn’t mean St. Matthew’s can’t reach our community for Christ. It simply means God is calling us to make a new beginning in the way we extend the love and grace of God outside these walls. As a congregation, we must make decisions about how and where we focus our attention and our efforts and our resources. In a word, we must

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2 http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/
repent—in the sense of the literal Greek, to “change our mind”. We must change our mind about what it is to be a faithful Christian living in a society that is becoming more and more secular.

Let me leave you with two bits of encouragement. First, somewhere around 60% of those who aren’t religious still claim to believe in God or a universal spirit.\(^3\) They are not closed to or impervious to God the Holy Spirit. It’s just church that they’re not interested in. We should be praying that God will lead those people to his Son Jesus through the Holy Spirit. We should be praying for wisdom for ourselves about how to go about reaching them. And second God doesn’t need church as we know it to reach people in our community. In fact, God chose people who were way out of the mainstream of establishment Jewish religious life through whom and to whom to bring Jesus. John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, all the familiar characters of Advent and Christmas were all outside the official religious life of the Temple and the synagogues.

God has transferred to us, his church, the job of taking the good news of the new beginning he gives us in Christ to the world. He is a great God. He is able to do great things. Let us trust in him and thank him for the new beginning he gives us in his Son Jesus Christ and ask him to guide us as we take this good news to our community.

Let us pray.

\(^3\) Ibid.
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