

PEACE
Mark 1:1-8
Colebrook Congregational Church
2nd Sunday of Advent 2014

While I was studying the gospel selection for this week, I found something a little interesting. The opening verse of the Gospel of Mark is different in various Greek versions, the language of the New Testament. Remember last week where I talked about Mark being performed? Well, some felt that the first verses were just what someone announced at the beginning of the performance of the Gospel. Some felt that the verse is part of the title. But one commentator, went back and looked at the Greek text. Now, there is a language requirement at seminary, and I ATTEMPTED to take New Testament Greek, and the professor suggested I drop the class before he had to fail me out. The second attempt the next year went much better. So, commentaries that discuss the Greek have a special place in my heart. But going back going to the Greek can add some things to our understanding of the message. There are puns and also Jesus being funny in the Greek, but it doesn't translate into English or through 2,000 years of cultural differences. I laughed out loud when I read that the commentator felt the first verse was omitted because it sounded silly. Five out of the seven words, in Greek, ended with the sound “-on.” It's assonance! Kinda like how the Swedish Chef from the Muppets talks! The silly-sounding sequence does not translate into English, so we just include it in the English versions.

Back to text, this is the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, and it introduces John the Baptist, and describes him as the fulfillment of a prophecy by the Prophet Isaiah. However, what is quoted is actually a combination, from the Prophets Isaiah & Micah, as well as a part from the Book of Exodus.

John's appearance is a bit odd. He is wearing a hair shirt and has been eating locusts and honey, which was common for ascetics at that time. He was viewed as a holy man, a prophet, and had many followers. He starts to baptize them, in a ritual to wash away their sins. Then one day, he announces that someone greater than him will come. He is proclaiming the Advent of Jesus' ministry!

In Judaism, there are two states that people can find themselves in, clean or

unclean. Many things made a person unclean, and therefore not acceptable to their community, so there has to be a ritual to become clean again and re-enter the community, and there are, involving bathtubs of various sizes. Jewish people back then, and today especially among the followers of Orthodox Judaism, have a constant worry about becoming unclean...which does not sound like a peaceful way to live. Every time a person becomes unclean, they are not acceptable to their community in that state, so they have to go through a process to follow the purification ritual with water that makes them clean again, and then re-joining their community.

As John proclaimed, he is baptizing with water, but Jesus is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit, which I think evokes the imagery of the Jewish purification ritual. When we do an adult baptism, it is different than the more common infant baptism. In the adult ritual, there is a bigger emphasize on the forgiveness of sins, that they are being washed away. In all types of baptism, it marks the person's entrance into the faithful community, and since it was with the Holy Spirit and not just water, the process does not need to be repeated! To me, that is a more peaceful way to live.

Jesus gives us this peace of mind. We do not need to worry when we follow Jesus. Jesus assures us that if we have faith in Him, no matter what happens in this life, He will remember us and keep us safe in the next. Jesus has freed us from worry and given us peace with the bigger questions...but then there is the everyday peacefulness and peace of mind that we need to seek.

Ironically, it is hard to find peace at Christmas time. We have to buy the gifts, we have to get the sales, we have to decorate the things, we have to prepare for our families and other social obligations. This time of year is filled with so much stress. It is perhaps nowhere more evident in retail shops. There is certainly a lack of peace working in retail during the holidays, as well as just being in a shop or a mall. The crowds, the rushing about, the lack of civility. There are some people who seem to enjoy making retail workers miserable. I also feel that this is cowardly, because they know the workers cannot respond...they just have to take it.

So how do we find peace amidst all the stress and chaos?

I usually avoid the malls and shopping centers as much as possible during the holidays. But, they are unavoidable, I would walk in, and it is almost an instant claustrophobic reaction, so I just try to minimize the contact.

I would find peace in libraries. Especially when I was at Yale. They had these massive open spaces, filled with books, and comfortable chairs, and alcoves to hide if you want. The New York City Public Library, the one a block or two from Grand Central, is kinda like that. Even with all the tours, and the urban chaos outside, for me, a library is like an oasis of peacefulness.

Also, I would find peacefulness in hiking...watching the beauty of God's Creation, away from the noise of the stressful cities. But peace is not only found in silence, but also certain types of noise, especially music. When I am feeling out of sorts, usually good rock music, or epic music, the type used in movie trailers, would actually be calming and create a sense of peace within me.

Both Theresa and I also enjoy guided imagery, which is a form of meditation that uses music and follows a script read by someone. She favors the Leaf on a Stream, where you float above and then away from the peace-stealing stress. I favor the Healing Light, where you imagine a light physically warming parts of your body as you stretch them, and releasing the stress through the breathing. It is simple mind over matter, and after you go through it a couple times, you are able to do it on your own, whenever you need to, and I have, to find peace again.

I invite you to ask yourself, how do you find peace?

This is very personal to each person. We are all different, and so what may work for one person may not work for another. And if you are not sure, you never know what will work until you try a variety of stuff and find out. So, if you are in need of peace of mind in this stressful season, and most of us are, I encourage you to take some time, to step away from the chaos, and find your Peace.

Amen.