

PEACE II
Mark 1:1-8
Colebrook Congregational Church
2nd Sunday of Advent 2015

The opening verse of the Gospel of Mark is different in various Greek versions, the language of the New Testament. Well, some felt that the first verses were just what someone announced at the beginning of the performance of Mark's Gospel. Some felt that the verse is part of the title. But one commentator, went back and looked at the Greek text. 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. Apparently, 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.

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

I was out with friends yesterday and I asked them, how do you find peace? I was met with silence, and then one of them said, "In the produce aisle?"

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.

I also enjoy guided imagery, which is a form of meditation that uses music and follows a script read by someone. 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 an other. 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.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the peace of mind that you give us through Jesus, and giving us the means to find peace in our everyday lives. We pray that we experience Your Peace whenever we need it. As we celebrate the Advent season and prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth, we pray that we remember why we are celebrating, and that no matter what happens, no matter how much we want to panic as the day approaches, that we remain calm and serene.

We pray for everyone who needs you. We pray for all who are sick and are suffering are healed; and that you guide the hands of their caregivers. We pray for all who are alone, that we can bring them company. We pray for all who are in distress, that we can bring them comfort. We pray for the forgiveness of sins, and we thank you for your understanding. We pray for peace throughout your creation.

We offer to You the prayers of our hearts, including...

Victims of violence and their families across our country, and also of the flooding in India.

Refugees escaping conflict

May Peace bring us the calm needed in these stressful times. And we pray that you move us to help bring peacefulness to others that may need it, use us to be instruments of peace in your service, in Jesus's name we pray, Amen.