**Being Good News**

Advent II December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40: 1-11 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 1: 1-8

A few weeks ago, as cases of COVID-19 had really started to increase I was in a conversation where a colleague in ministry was talking about how their family had decided to postpone their family Christmas gathering and celebrations to have Christmas in July. As we were uncertain at that point whether in-person worship was going to be able to continue for those who were worshipping in person, there was also the suggestion that we should postpone church service celebrations of Christmas until July, when we could probably gather in person. For me it makes perfect sense to postpone family gatherings and other social celebrations until we can gather in person, but not worship celebrations. This kind of thinking reflects a binary – that we can’t celebrate when suffering, we can’t experience joy in the misdt of pain or despair. Many of us know this not to be true. I believe that our faith and especially the Advent and Christmas messages have something important to say to us during these times and particularly this time we are presently in. We can’t cancel or postpone God breaking into our lives through Jesus at Christmas. The messages of hope, peace, joy and love are important ones for us to embrace and hear as we continue to move through this pandemic. As our Moderator Richard Bott posted recently, “It’s impossible to cancel Christmas. Christmas is celebrated each time a disciple of Jesus lives love”.

In the scripture reading for today, John the Baptist and Jesus come during a time when people were suffering a different kind of plague. A plague of Roman occupation and oppression that created much injustice and suffering. Jesus came preaching a gospel of love. This is the Good News that Mark names at the beginning of his gospel. It is what John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus in our gospel reading today. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He is calling people to turn away from the things that keep them from God and doing God’s will, to be baptised, and forgiven. Mark names Jesus as the Son of God, in contrast to the Roman Empire who named Caesar, the Emperor as a son of god believing this oppressive ruler to be divine. Naming Jesus as the Son of God, then, would have provided a subversive message of hope for peace and transformation from an unjust system. This would truly be good news for the community. It is not much wonder that ‘the whole countryside’ and ‘all of Jerusalem’ were coming to see John! The phrase ‘son of God’ means having the quality or qualities of God, and in contrast to the Emperor, the people could sense and see the true qualities of God in John and later in Jesus.

John proclaimed this good news in the wilderness, often seen as a dangerous place but he is transforming it to a place of hope and new life. Theologian Deloris Williams offers a different understanding or interpretation of the traditional view of the wilderness, one rooted in the experiences of enslaved people which remains present in the traditions of many Black churches today. She compares it to Hagar’s experience who was exiled by Abraham out into the desert. For Hagar it was

“a place of struggle and Spirit, both problematic and promising. For in the wilderness, Hagar meets God. Hagar’s experiences become symbolic of the African American experience of wilderness as both sacred and struggle-ridden.”

It was in the wilderness they could find a safe path to freedom. As we move through this pandemic which could be considered time in the wilderness, what are the sacred times you have had as a result of this wilderness? As we move toward a very different Christmas season, might this wilderness time, lead us to reflect on what is really important to us for this season? What is the message of Christmas, of Christ, that will be important for you, for us this year?

As we think about John’s call to repentance, what are the things that can hinder us from celebrating and sharing the good news, this Advent, Christmas season? Are we getting stuck in binary thinking that if we are suffering, we can’t celebrate or experience joy? Some have named that their despair and worry makes it hard to get into the spirit of the season. Others started decorating early because they needed light and celebration in these times. Some complain about not being able to go out shopping. Some are sad that we cannot gather at parties and concerts. It is also very difficult to think about celebrating Christmas without being able to gather the whole family together. Yet, when we have known suffering, we can also experience joy. Many of us have realized that in the midst of pain and grief, we can experience deep gratitude or joy. These feel like dark times, and as the days are getting darker, and the nights longer, Christmas comes just after the days start getting longer and light comes into our lives again and again. While things that may hinder us from celebrating are legitimate and important concerns, we also recognize that this season can be so busy that we forget to stop and ponder the stories and the message. As the Godly Play Advent story says, when talking about the mystery of Christmas: “Sometimes people can walk right through a mystery and not even know it is there. This time of year, you see people hurrying in the stores buying things and doing this or that that they miss the mystery.” Maybe this year we will have time to ponder the mystery, celebrating the good news, and help others to as well. All this reminds me of the story How the Grinch Stole Christmas and how he was trying to take away all the things that he thought made Christmas and yet Christmas came all the same. We read what happened in the story:

“How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!” and he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! “maybe Christmas,” he thought, “doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas perhaps means a little bit more!”

This was good news to the Grinch, who then understood Christmas a little deeper. Maybe we like the Who’s in Whoville can be good news to others as we enter into this beautiful, meaningful time. How can we be good news during this time?

We can be good news when we call those who are alone, lonely or who are struggling.

We can be good news when we celebrate Advent and Christmas in the midst of and in spite of the challenges we face.

We can be good news when we invite others to join us in our online celebrations.

We can be good news when we hold on to hope in the midst of despair and help others to do the same.

We can be good news when we see new possibilities for peace, even in the midst of discord.

We can be good news when we recognize we can and help others experience joy even in the midst of grief

We can be good news when we live out loving our neighbour.

We can be good news when see Christ, God in each other, breaking into our lives in unexpected ways.

We can be good news when we share God’s message of love and compassion, justice and peace with those around us who are struggling.

This is a challenging time and it can be hard to celebrate when times are difficult. We, along with the people of God have also been through challenging times before. There is much in our faith and history that can speak to us, sustain us, and give us hope as we seek peace in our lives and in the world. I was struck this morning by some words in Richard Rohr’s daily meditation: “*Whenever the material and the spiritual coincide, there is the Christ*. Jesus fully accepted that human-divine identity and walked it into history. Henceforth, the Christ “comes again” whenever we are able to see the spiritual and the material coexisting, in any moment, in any event, and in any person”. May we draw on one another, our faith traditions, and God in Christ to engage in the meaning of Advent and Christmas this season that we may experience and be the good news for ourselves and others.