

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Advent's Inevitable!

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2011

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Mark 1:1-8

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."

It's the Second Sunday of Advent. Christmas is just three weeks away. This is the time of year when people often ask, "Are you all ready for Christmas?" Sometimes you hear this reply: "Do we have a choice?" Christmas will come December 25 whether we're ready or not. It's inevitable. It can't be avoided or evaded.

When we think of something as inevitable, we can get a feeling of claustrophobia. We can feel hemmed in. Inevitability gives us no options or alternatives. But inevitability is not always negative. That's what our readings this morning are telling us about the inevitable return of Jesus Christ. He will judge the world and recreate the world as a place "**where righteousness is at home.**" That new eternal world of joy where God's people live radiant with God's own life in God's eternal presence is what makes the gospel, "**the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,**" *good* news.

The good news or gospel of God's recreation of reality is absolutely certain. As Isaiah says, "**The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.**" The "**good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God**" is unchanging and unchangeable. Christ's second coming, or "second advent" is inevitable.

But the setting into which the good news comes changes all the time. The crowds that flocked to the Jordan River to be baptized by John lived under the harsh occupation and oppression of Rome. They lived with the national guilt of having been sent into exile in Babylon for their sins. They desperately looked for the mighty Savior the prophets like Isaiah promised would come to set things right, to exalt the humble and topple the proud. But that setting changed long ago.

The setting of the people the gospel comes to changes. So people in every setting must adjust their thinking, their expectations, and their lives to the good news. Mark tells us huge crowds did that very thing: they flocked to John to confess their sins and be baptized, something only Gentiles did when they became Jews. The inevitable, unchanging gospel was having its effect in changing hearts and lives among the Jewish people in 1st century Jerusalem. These people were repenting, changing to adjust from the setting they lived in to the unchanging "**good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.**"

Because the circumstances of whatever setting human beings live in are so changeable, we have safeguards against unwelcome change. We pass laws requiring cars to have seat belts and airbags to guard against unwelcome changes in the trajectory of our vehicles. We have building codes to guard against unwelcome changes due to dangerous construction. Nations have military forces to literally guard them from unwelcome changes that come from outside military aggression.

Individuals have safeguards against unwelcome changes too. We buy insurance against unwelcome changes in our property or our life or our health. We have set routines, ways of doing things. We have traditions, ways of doing things that we've learned from previous generations.

Safeguards against unwelcome change are good and necessary, but they have unintended consequences. Often these safeguards against unwelcome change condition us to think of **all** change as unwelcome. There are a million jokes about people resisting change. Here are just two, about churches. "How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Change! Are you kidding? My grandmother donated that light bulb!" "What are the Seven Last Words of the Church? "That's the way we've always done it!"

Safeguards against unwelcome change can also become safeguards against **“the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.”** That’s why Mark’s gospel begins with repentance, with John the Baptist’s amazing ministry. “Repentance” in Greek means literally, “to change your mind.” It means to look at yourself and the world according to the gospel, and not according to the setting you live in. Repentance sounds like hard work, but it’s not all up to us. Scripture tells us **“God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.” (Romans 2:4)** When we see the majesty and beauty of God’s eternal kingdom in Christ, and the depths of his eternal, other-worldly love in dying for our sins, we change. God helps us change through his Holy Spirit. God himself works in us to adjust our hearts to the unchanging gospel of his Son.

The crowds flocking to John’s baptism were looking for a mighty Savior to help them throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and lead them to freedom. They recognized that God had sent John the Baptist, and that some great change was coming. But John tells them, **“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.”**

The power of Jesus Christ the Son of God is not military or political power. It is spiritual power. It is the authority of God himself in Jesus Christ to forgive sins, bring life out of death, and command evil spirits to leave. And it is the power of God himself in the Holy Spirit in whom he will immerse all those who come to him in faith. John is saying, “I am no big deal. All I do is baptize people with water. But Someone is coming who is more powerful than I. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

God adjusts a person from the setting in which they hear **“the good news of Jesus Christ”** to **“the good news of Jesus Christ.”** God gives the person faith in the inevitability of the gospel. He gives them faith in Christ’s inevitable return to judge the living and the dead. He gives them faith in the inevitability of his or her own sins having been already judged in Christ’s death on the cross. This is welcome change!

God effects a permanent and lasting change. Christ dwells in the person’s heart by this faith, and baptizes them in the Holy Spirit. He gives them spiritual power to live in this changing and changeable world according to the norms and reality of **“the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.”** The change God makes is a new beginning. The person is **“born again,”** or **“born from above.”** (John 3:3) He or she is guaranteed to be part of that **“new heavens and new earth, where righteousness is at home.” (2 Peter 3:13)** He or she becomes **“a new creation”**. **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a**

new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The value of **“the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God”** cannot be exaggerated or overestimated. Its origins are in the eternal love of God the Father for his Son Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because of God’s love for the Son, those who hear and receive this good news are loved by the Father in the Son. They have **“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 13:14)** Clothed in Christ, when he returns, they will **“without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.”** It’s inevitable!

The first sentence in Mark’s gospel is really the title of the whole book. Mark’s gospel is only **“the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”** It had its beginning in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as Mark describes them in his book. But its end is over the horizon of the future. The **“good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God”** is still being proclaimed in our setting! Today, this morning we have the opportunity to allow God to change our lives to adjust to it and not to our setting.

This can be hard. We all have safeguards against unwelcome change that sometimes lead us to feel that any change is unwelcome. Let’s do an exercise to show you what I mean. Cross your arms in front of yourself. Take a moment to notice which arm is on top. Is it your right or your left? Either one is fine. Now, uncross your arms. Now cross them again, but put the opposite arm on top. How does that feel? It just doesn’t feel right, does it? All your life you’ve been doing it the old way. Imagine now that you have to consciously do it differently from now on. It would be hard.

If we have trouble crossing our arms differently, how are we going to behave differently by telling other people about Jesus? How are we going to tell a neighbor, or a friend in school, or the acquaintance at the supermarket, or our coworker **“the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God?”** We’ll never be able to change enough to do that on our own. But **“God’s kindness leads us to repentance”**—to change our minds about our neighborhood, or the store, or school, or the office and the people in them. Those places are part of the setting. They change, but Christ’s gospel of love and eternal life and joy never changes. People need to know! Jesus will come back!

That’s what “Advent” means—“coming”. Jesus came the first time to die for sins and be resurrected for eternal life. Jesus is coming the second time to judge and eliminate the unrighteousness in this world where righteousness is not at home. He will replace it with a new world populated by his own people lit with his own radiant life. These are the broad outlines he gives us in his word. The

inevitable full reality is over the horizon of the future, but we have it now in part. You and I can experience it in part as we daily allow his kindness to lead us to change and adjust to the gospel of Christ.

Let me suggest three ways to do this. Do these things every day. First, pray. Pray specifically for people you know to come to faith in Christ. Second, read. Read Mark's gospel, and see how Christ's spiritual power and authority change lives. Third, tell someone about him. Our responsibility is only to be the "herald of good tidings." We are not responsible for whether people respond or not. But if we are faithful, we will see Christ come into someone's life. It's inevitable. Let us pray.