

Mark 1: 1-8

Where is God? Persistent Hope

December 7, 2014

Rev Dr. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

Today we continue the season of Advent. It is the time of the year when we prepare for the birth of Jesus. It is a season when Christian churches everywhere embark on a journey of faith. We light a new candle each week and think about how to prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus. Now society tells us that the best way to prepare for Christmas is to find the fullest tree, send the cutest picture of your family on a card, and buy the best gifts for everyone on your list. But the church tells us that there are other rituals in Advent. There are marks of progress that have nothing to do with a decorating competition or a gift-giving frenzy.

The Church says that this is not a time for frenzy at all. It is a time to stop rushing about, and to consider the true meaning of this season, which has almost nothing to do with our gifts but with God's gift in Christ. How do we prepare for an encounter with God in Jesus? We start with the story – this ancient tale of Bethlehem and hills covered in sheep, and angels.

During Advent we remember how the people of Israel were always down on their luck, and last to the table of life's bounty but how they believed in God's promises. We re-call that the Jewish prophets would come to coral and correct the people prodding them with the news that God was watching, and ready to assist. God's next messenger was just around the corner.

We re-call ancient people used to the dark of winter, who studied the skies and noticed signs of change. Wise Men in the East predicted a new revelation from God and searched for a light to follow. In our services this month each week we will look at these familiar characters and wonder what they can teach us about hope, which is our theme. for our lives today. Today we read the story of John the Baptist. Let's take a look at the

story of John the Baptist and see what he can tell us about how to find hope for our lives today. I believe his story has a lot to say.

John the Baptist was an odd man. He was a good Jew, the son of a prominent priest in a respected family in Jerusalem. He grew up in a fervently religious home, in a close knit community. John was bright and devoted to his people, but he knew the history of the Jews, and how they had suffered. He knew that the Greeks had made pagan altars in the temple in Jerusalem and co-opted the priests. He knew that the Romans had annexed Judea to Syria and made Israel part of their buffer zone, with no respect for Jewish custom or faith. He could see that Rome had chosen a cruel and ambitious man when they appointed Herod governor of Judea. He had watched the Roman taxes break the back of his people and stifle all economic initiative. He knew how quick they were to crucify anyone who posed a threat to Roman hegemony.

As a person of faith, respected for his integrity, John decided he could not stay in Jerusalem any longer. He could no longer reside where his parents had made their home and go along with business as usual. To stay would be to prop up a system of oppression. He made a bold decision. It was not a decision based on despair, but for him, it was full of hope. He decided to move to the wilderness. The Bible says he subsisted on a diet of locusts for protein and honey for nourishment.

Scholars have excavated the remains of whole communities of people who abandoned the civilized world and gone to live in the desert on the hills above the Dead Sea. There they apparently studied the Bible, ate their meals in common and talked about their hopes for a new regime in Israel. They were good people who had decided that they could no longer be part of the status quo. They could not abide with business as usual. They could not ignore the suffering of their people, or make peace with it. They needed to find an alternative way to live.

Sometimes hope demands this of us. Hope is not always cheerful or upbeat. There are times in life when hope is persistent, and doggedly determined. There is a darker stubborn quality to hope too. It is the ability to see the world as it is but fight for something new. It is the ability to be so committed to your principals that you

cannot tolerate injustice. Hope is the refusal to comply with injustice. Hope can be fiercely critical in the face of evil human suffering. Hope can be a stand against hypocrisy or the unwillingness to support a corrupt system. There are times when the most hopeful thing you can do is say "No".

I thought that last week would be my one sermon in December when I would feel compelled to talk about race and police brutality. Perhaps I was naïve, and though we will devote more time to a conversation about justice in January, I want to address the Grand Jury decision in the death of Eric Garner from Staten Island.

This week In New York a grand jury failed to press charges in the death of a man in Staten Island, Eric Garner. Several police officers held Mr. Garner down while one man had him in a choke hold and he pleaded for his last breaths. The video which has gone viral gives few clues as to what he was suspected of doing, or what threat he posed to anyone. But it is clear that the people responsible for keeping the peace have had a hand in escalating the violence that resulted in Mr. Garner's death.

This comes after a week of more violence. News from Phoenix reported that last Tuesday evening Romain Brisbon was shot and killed while the unarmed African American 34-year old was delivering dinner to his four children. Apparently acting on a drug tip that implicated the man's SUV, one officer pursued him, confronted him at his apartment and when he reached for medication in his pocket, shot him twice in the chest. The police in Arizona have defended the officer's decision to use ultimate force; but according to the New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/06/us/phoenix-officer-who-shot-black-suspect-mistook-pill-bottle-for-gun-authorities-say.htm> others are calling this another execution. Of course this is all in the wake of a Grand Jury decision not to prosecute the police officer in Ferguson Missouri for shooting an unarmed black man Michael Green on August 9th.

Many people in this country are starting to ask some hard questions about our values, our system of justice, our police protocols, and the state of civil rights. Where did we lose sight of the principal undergirding our justice system that declares civilians are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty? Why is it that a

growing number of police officers charged with protecting public safety have exercised so little restraint in these interactions? What is it about unarmed black men that causes some officers to escalate the violence until it turns deadly? Why do so many white people in our society feel so threatened by African American men? Why do we all – all of us- tolerate this level of sanctioned violence?

We are at a place where we need a national conversation about the ideals of this nation, and where we have gone wrong. Street protests were organized in 170 cities across the country last week. One minister in San Francisco said that the people are so frustrated it is not as though the buildings are on fire, but democracy itself is on fire. One new twitter feed speaks to me of hope. It is entitled *#This stops today*. Started by Whites and Blacks united in a determination to take action to change the way we do business in this country, it sets the stage for a new determination to make change, starting now.

Today we light the second candle in our Advent wreath. It is the candle of peace. When we think of the concept of peace most of us imagine that peace is the emotion of ultimate calm. It evokes images of deep breathing, vacation time on a long beach, no interruption, and limited stress. But peace is not just a ceasefire in the various skirmishes of life. It is not a precarious truce in an otherwise fractious life. Peace is not an island vacation because the sad truth is that when you try to escape if things are not right, you bring your unfinished business with you. No one can find peace without justice. There is no true peace in a land where some people lives are in constant danger. No one is secure when some people can be picked off for random petty violations of law that escalate into deadly violence. Not really.

I admit that this is hard stuff to think about. It will be tempting to ignore it. But as people of faith who are preparing for the birth of Jesus Christ, we have to stop business as usual. This year as we prepare for Christmas we cannot pretend that everything is just fine. We cannot ignore the pain of African Americans and still have any integrity about searching for the Prince of Peace.

Advent offers us a time-out. It provides space to think, to question, to wonder what the world might be like if we re-shaped it in light of the values of Jesus Christ. It is a chance to walk in the wilderness by the Dead

Sea and pray about our lives. One of my favorite authors - a wise, funny and ferocious woman - is a Benedictine sister, Joan Chittister. She writes about Advent in her blog. "We learn in Advent to stay in the present, knowing that only a present well-lived can possibly lead us to the fullness of life".

Advent offers us a "break from the fast-paced world. It makes us think, and look beyond today to the great tomorrow of life. Without Advent we remain in denial, moved only by the race to nowhere. Without Advent we are left to consume and control this life that exhausts the world around us. Advent offers us values that last, a taste of the spirit that does not die and won't slip through our fingers like melting snow."

<http://rosemarieberger.com/2009/11/30/joan-chittister-what-is-advent-about/>

As we wait for the coming of the reign of God Advent after Advent, we come to realize that its coming depends on us. What we do this time will either hasten or slow, sharpen or dim our own commitment to do our part to bring it.