

“What Kind of Power?  
December 7, 2008

Isaiah 40:1-5  
Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13  
Mark 1:1-8

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” What a vision. What a hope. And, let’s face it, what a seemingly impossible possibility.

Love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace. When’s the last time you picked up a newspaper, turned on the TV or radio, or checked your favorite websites ... and found love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace having a joyous get-together? The last time I checked – which was last night – it was alienation, desperation, and violence that were doing a lot of meeting, while economic uncertainty, fear, and hunger were in an ever-more intimate embrace. In Mumbai, Baghdad, northern California, South Texas, Wall Street, Main Street, and probably any other place on earth we care to look, it looks like the psalmist’s vision of love and peace stands a snowball’s chance in ... Sonoma ... of ever coming true.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” We read and hear this vision on the second Sunday of Advent, as God invites us to surrender more fully to this season of waiting and preparation. We hear them on the day we light the candles of hope and peace. But how do all these words – steadfast love, hope, faithfulness, peace – become something far more than words? How do they become a living, healing reality? By what power can this vision become genuine human experience? By what power can this vision become a daily reality?

These are the questions that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were (and are) trying to answer. These are the questions that Paul, much to his surprise, found himself trying to answer in the new Christian communities in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Rome, and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. These are the questions that Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and countless other men and women have for nearly 2000 years answered, simply and enigmatically, with these words: “By the power of God in Christ.”

Mark opens his gospel, the earliest in the New Testament, with the simple words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” *and* with a brief story about John the baptizer. Take a moment to consider those first six words, “The *beginning* of the good news.” Perhaps the most obvious meaning of the phrase is that it’s simply the introduction to the story, a biblical equivalent of “Once upon a time.” And yet I think there’s more to those simple words, and it is this: the story that the Gospel of Mark tells – the stories that all the gospels tell – are simply the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. The story provides only the first few chapters of the never-ending story of the power of God at work in Jesus Christ. The Christian part of God’s work to love, heal, and redeem the world begins with the stories of the gospel, but God was at work *before* the birth of Jesus and hasn’t stopped working since.

What, then, was it that began with “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,” so many years ago? Mark presents us with John the baptizer, AKA John the Baptist, who proclaims that there is someone coming who will have great power. “The

one who is more powerful than I is coming after me, and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Mark has set the stage in a way that would have seemed very familiar to the first generation or two (or three or four) of his listeners. By the time this gospel was written down, the Roman Empire had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, killed or enslaved thousands of Jews, as well as thousands of other peoples from other lands and cultures, and seemed destined to take over the entire known world through its military and economic power. The fullness of that power resided in the Emperor and his armies, and the emperor was known as lord, savior, and son of God. Statues of the emperor were displayed prominently in the towns and cities throughout the empire, on the streets and in the local temples. He was the object of worship and veneration. And, guess what – his edicts and instructions, his laws and decrees were known by the name “euaggelion.” Can you guess what “euaggelion” means? It means “good news,” and it’s the word from which the English words “evangelist and evangelism” are derived.

So now perhaps the first few lines of Mark sound a little different to our ears: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God – the beginning of the euaggelion, not of Caesar, but of Jesus Christ. And by the way, it’s Jesus who’s the Son of God, not Caesar, not the ruler of the mighty Roman Empire.” And just in case we haven’t quite taken it in that this gospel is making some radical, even revolutionary claims, we also hear John the baptizer telling the crowds that the one who is to come – that would be Jesus – is coming with power ... and with the Holy Spirit.

What a stage this gospel sets. Listen, it says, and you will hear the good news of someone other than Caesar. You will hear the story of a different Son of God and, oh, yes, the one at the center of this story has great power. With that introduction, what would have seemed most likely to follow would have been a recitation of great and daring deeds, conquest, battle, and personal triumph ... a story of power, raw human power. But that’s not the story that unfolds in the Gospel of Mark or Matthew or Luke or John, it’s not the story that’s at the heart of the apostle Paul’s ministry, and it’s not the story that has stayed alive in the Christian tradition even as the tradition has distorted the story and frequently lost its way.

The story that unfolds is instead the story of a different kind of Son of God. It’s a story of healing, of preaching and teaching, of courage, of challenge to authority. It is a story of love and forgiveness, even in the face of betrayal and death.

It is the story of the power of self-giving love. It is the story of the power of self-giving service, and it’s just as absurd and just as radical as it was nearly 2000 years ago in claiming that that is the mightiest kind of power of all.

In this season of Advent, we are waiting and preparing for the beginning of this story of power, and, thanks to the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, the story begins with yet another challenge to imperial power and the imperial imagination, because Jesus, this Son of God, is born not to noble parents, not in palace and not even a modest home. This story of God’s mighty power in Christ starts out in a backwater town, with the rich and famous most definitely not in the picture.

The power of self-giving love and service. The gospels and the best of the Christian tradition proclaim that this is the power that can overcome hate, violence, indifference, fear, and everything else that stands in the way of the psalmist’s vision of a world in which “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will

kiss each other.” This proclamation, just like the psalmist’s vision, can be a little hard to believe, a little too “out there” to put much faith in.

But I urge you to join me in thinking about it. Start by thinking about what happens here in this church. Think about the power of the love and service that sustains, nourishes, and blesses this congregation and this community. You and I could literally spend hours trying to name and celebrate all the acts of generosity, kindness, and care that radiate the power of love.

(Care of the church grounds; removal of large, high sanctuary speaker; new, beautiful signs; loving care through phone calls, visits, cards; generosity of a Thanksgiving meal to all who wanted to come; rides, errands, meals, simple kindness; feeding the hungry near and far; and so much more.)

If you doubt that all these things and the hundreds of gifts of self and service that we don’t even know about have the power to transform the world, try to imagine what our life and your life would look like without them. I’ve tried to imagine a congregation and a world stripped of that kind of power, and they would be a dreary, dreary, lifeless places. These gifts of love and service are the ways in which God brings light and love into this world.

So the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ is the beginning of the good news of the power of love and giving. And the extra good news in the news about this kind of power is that it doesn’t fade as bodies age and minds become perhaps a little less sharp.

The good news about this kind of power is that it doesn’t decline as the stock market declines, the unemployment lines increase, and human need grows deeper. The good news about this kind of power is that it can actually *increase* when we and our brothers and sisters are struggling.

The good news about this kind of power is also that it doesn’t depend on physical strength and certainly not on economic or military strength. It depends on what Martin Luther King Jr. called “a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.”

This kind of power is available to us all. This kind of power seeks to heal and bless the world. And this kind of power comes to us in unexpected places, through unexpected people, just when we and the world need it the most.

Thanks be to God for all the gifts of this life and this season of Advent.

Amen.

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