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Why Christmas is Still Merry: It's GOOD News!

December 6, 2020

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TEXT: Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Dear friends,

We hear this expression a lot this time of year, and we say it a lot as well: “Merry Christmas.” But what is so merry about Christmas, especially if you're out of work or struggling with an illness or feeling a sense of loss or feeling fatigued or challenged by the complications of pandemic living? Can one really have a merry Christmas without

all the traditions and trimmings, like big family gatherings and dinners and big worship services and choirs that have all been a part of celebrating Christmas in the past? The answer to that is yes, you can. Christmas is so much more than all of that. That's what our texts for the next three weeks are going to teach us. They're going to show us why Christmas is still merry.

Our passage for today from Mark's Gospel gives us the first reason why Christmas is still merry: because it's about good news, we're told. The best news you'll ever hear – “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God,” Mark begins. It's good news, and don't we all need a little bit of that these days? I'm reminded of an old Anne Murray hit song that's more of a lament about all the bad things you hear in the news about what's going on in the world. And it has a line in it that says, “We sure could use a little good news today.” And I say amen to that! Well, Mark tells us today that there really is good news, just like the angel said to the shepherds on Christmas. “Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people.” This good news is about a person – it's the good news about Jesus. That name, “Jesus,” actually means “God saves.” So what's being communicated here is that God is involved in this and there's some saving that's going to happen.

But that's not all – it goes on. This good news is about Jesus Christ. Now, Christ isn't His second name, as some might think. It's actually a title which means “the anointed one of God.” In the Old Testament history of Israel we're told it was kings who were anointed – like king Saul and King David and so on. So we're talking about King Jesus. Israel at the time of Jesus was waiting for a Christ. Another word for Christ in Hebrew is Messiah. You've heard “the Messiah,” Handel's *Messiah*... It's actually about God sending the Messiah to save his people. Well, this is an actual title as well, that this “messiah” would come and rescue and restore Israel as a nation. He would be a great political leader, a warrior king who would raise up an army and defeat Israel's enemies once and for all. His arrival would bring power and peace and prosperity for the people of Israel. And though this is what Israel was expecting, they're hoping for, we find out later in Mark's Gospel that this King, this Messiah, had a much bigger goal in mind than raising up armies and building an earthly kingdom. The good news is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Mark, goes on. Meaning He is divine; He's God in the flesh, coming to do something absolutely mind-boggling and amazing: save His people. As the Nicene Creed in the Christian church eloquently says it:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God,

Eternally begotten of the father,
God from God, light from light,
True God from true God; begotten, not made.
Of one being with the Father, through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation, He came down from Heaven by the power of the
Holy Spirit.
He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.

It's amazing when you think about it. Christmas is really about God becoming vulnerable for us. Pastor Tim Keller writes of the uniqueness of this vulnerability. His words help us to marvel at this statement that we are looking at about Jesus, the son of God. He says:

There's no way to have a real relationship without becoming vulnerable to hurt. Christmas tells us that God became breakable and fragile. God became someone we could hurt. Why? To get us back. No other religion, whether secularism, Greco, Roman, paganism, Eastern religion, Judaism, or Islam believes God became breakable, or suffered, or even had a body.

Another Christian writer, Max Lucado, captures a bit of the wonder of all this in his book "Next Door Savior":

Charlie was ten. School was out for Christmas and the family had chosen to spend the holidays in the country. The boy pressed his nose against the bay window of the vacation home and marveled at the British winter. He was happy to trade the blackened streets of London for the cotton-white freshness of snow covered hills. His mom invited him to go for a drive with her, and he quickly accepted. A great moment was in the making. She snaked the car down the twisty road, the tires crunched the snow and the boy puffed his breath on the window. He was thrilled. The mother, however, was anxious. Heavy snow began to fall, visibility lessened. As she took the curve, the car started to slide, and didn't stop until it was in a ditch. She tried to drive out but the tires just spun. Little Charlie pushed and his mom pressed the gas, but no luck. They were stuck. They needed help.

A mile down the road sat a house. Off they went and knocked on the door. "Of course," the woman told them, "come in, warm yourselves. The phone is yours to use." She offered tea and cookies and urged them to stay until help arrived.

An ordinary event? Don't suggest that to the woman who opened that door – she has never forgotten that day. She's retold the story a thousand times. And who could blame her? It's not often that royalty appears on your porch. For the two travelers stranded by that England winter were no less than Queen Elizabeth [II] and the heir to the throne, 10-year-old Charles.

The word on the streets of Heaven and the lips of Christians is that something far grander has happened to our world. Royalty has walked down our streets. Heaven's Prince has knocked on our door. His visit, however, was no accident.

So just in this opening line of Mark, we learn that Christmas is merry because it's about good news that God loves this world, you and me, so much that He gave us the best gift we could ever receive: Jesus Christ, His son. In Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, became a human being. God took on flesh to get us back. He experienced life as we experienced it, with its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, and that means we can pray to Him knowing that He knows exactly how we feel and what we're going through. And we learn also that He is faithful to us. He did not desert this sinful, broken world, but sent a savior just as He had promised in the Old Testament. God is always faithful to His word. We can build a life on that. As the Old Testament prophet Isaiah reassures us: “The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord breathes on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” Christmas, the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God, reminds us that God is faithful, He's always faithful, and in that we can still rejoice and be merry. We have a God that we can trust in all things.

Now, this good news is not only about who Jesus is, but also about what he will do. We're told what Jesus will do in the next lines of this passage as we meet John the Baptist. First, He has come to rescue you and me. You might be wondering, “Where does it say that? I don't see that.” Well, let me explain. Isaiah's words of prophecy are being used to introduce John the Baptist here: “The words as it is written in the prophet Isaiah. See, I'm sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make His path straight.” These words were first heard during a very dark time in Israel's history. They were in exile in the land of Babylon. And Isaiah's proclamation to them is an announcement from God that He is going to rescue His people and bring them home, which He did. So the use of this statement, introducing us to John the Baptist, tells us

that the good news is going to be about a rescue. Only this time it will not be a rescue from physical exile or from foreign domination. It's a rescue from something much bigger, the stakes are much higher: a rescue from the power of sin and death and the devil which held humanity hopelessly captive. This is a spiritual rescue. Christmas is about God in the flesh, Jesus, stepping into this world to do battle for us and set us free, bring us home to God.

John the Baptist also tells us that Jesus came to give you a new life. As well as rescue you, he says to his listeners, "the one who is mightier than I is coming and He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Jesus came to enter into your life and to live in you through His Holy Spirit, to give you His power to follow Him, as God promised through the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. He says, "And I will give them one new heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statute and keep my rules and obey them." He gives us the power to live in righteousness, you see, before our God. And the Holy Spirit is given to shape us into someone more beautiful inside and outside than we could ever imagine – to make us more loving and joyful and peaceful and patient and kind and gentle and generous and self controlled; so much closer to what God had in mind for us when he first designed human beings. That's the plan.

So Christmas is still merry because it's about the good news that we have been loved in a big way. Jesus, the king, the son of God, has entered our world and rescued us through a cross and empty tomb. And He immerses those who believe in Him with His Holy Spirit to give us a beautiful new life with God. That's something to be merry about.

Now, that kind of news is calling for a response on our part. The message of John, which, by the way, is also the message of Jesus as we will see, is an objective message of good news with a subjective personal appeal to it – an appeal to repent and believe the good news. To "repent," it's an old time word, but it basically means this: to leave behind the trash in your life and turn to go a new way with Jesus. It's as simple as that; giving up the idea that you can run your own life and surrendering yourself to His care and His leadership. Our story tells us what that looks like: it says the people in the wilderness came confessing their sins. There was penitence: they acknowledge their disobedience, their pride, self-centeredness before God. They received John's baptism of

repentance as well in the Jordan River as a sign of their need and their wanting of God's forgiveness.

We, too, can come today confessing our sins, asking for forgiveness. In fact, it's good for our spiritual health, even if you're already a baptized Christian, according to the great Christian reformer Martin Luther. He writes in his small catechism that repentance is to be a daily thing – that it's good for the soul. He writes,

Baptism signifies that the old Adam, [the old sinner in us] together with all sins and evil lust, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and put to death. That the new person should daily come forth, right to live before God in righteousness and holiness forever.

And we are to not only repent, we can believe the good news. They heard the news of this mighty one, as John called Jesus, and the promise of rescue and a new spirit filled life with God, and they came forward believing the good news. So can you come forward believing, placing your trust in Jesus Christ and what He's done for you. To believe that God has loved you profoundly, profoundly through His Son. And follow him for the rest of your life. And stake your life on that truth. Christian writer Ravi Zacharias writes of faith in Christ in this way: "Faith is confidence in the person of Jesus Christ and in His power so that even when His power does not serve my end, my confidence in Him remains because of who He is."

Dearly beloved – and that is what you are in God's sight. That's just one good reason why Christmas is still merry. It's not about family gatherings or special foods and trees and lights and gift giving and crowds; those are nice things, don't get me wrong. But they're just the trimmings. Christmas is really about celebrating the good news about our God, who, out of love for each one of us, has done an amazing and wondrous thing through Jesus Christ, His son. His arrival means rescue and new life for each one of us. And so, as the apostle Paul exclaimed, thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift. And that is why Christmas is still merry.

Amen.