

“Space For New Life (B)”

12/5/2021

First Presbyterian, Kirkwood

Texts: Isaiah 9.2-7, Luke 3.1-6, Mark 1.21-28, Mark 4.35-41

Sermon Series: Imagining The Messiah Afresh

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Luke 3.1-6 (NRSV)

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

One of the things that most fascinates me about the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, are the echoes it contains, by which I mean that the scripture writers and editors within Judaism faithfully and imaginatively and regularly echoed one story from scripture to explain God’s activity with the people of Israel in another day and time. For example, the story of the great Exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is echoed, is referenced many, many generations later when a portion of the people of Israel are being carried away, being exiled to Babylon. Being forcibly marched to Babylon is not the same thing as fleeing from Egypt into the unknown wilderness but there are similarities between the two experiences and people who knew the first Exodus story, could find comfort and hope in the linguistic echoes and metaphorical echoes and the faith echoes of that initial communal experience as they were being taken into exile.

The Prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah were experts at such echoing! And, so it should be no surprise to us, that in a similar echoing way, today’s Isaiah lesson is echoed by the thinkers and writers of what would become the New Testament in describing Jesus as the Messiah. I wish I could point to an exact quote of our Isaiah lesson in one of the Gospels, but alas, it does not exist! Rather, the Wonderful Counselor, and Mighty God, and Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace, which Isaiah proclaims that God will send among God’s people as a Messiah finds many echoes in the early church’s understand of who Jesus is, and how Jesus represents God in humanity’s midst.

In our Gospel lesson, John the Baptist provides one of the first New Testament echoes, by declaring that people must prepare their lives for the coming of Messiah-Jesus. George Frederic Handel, in his musical masterpiece, *The Messiah*, provides the clearest echo between Isaiah’s promised Messiah, and the Jesus we proclaim as Lord and Savior. And while Handel was certainly no Gospel writer, I think his echoing of Isaiah chapter nine, verse six, as a faithful way to describe the work and person of Jesus is spot on!

Each week during this season of Advent the sermon will focus on one of the four titles, which Isaiah uses to describe the Messiah. Last week when we looked in upon the good folks at Perseverance Presbyterian we considered Jesus the Wonderful Counselor, who functioned in this role as an agent of extraordinary plans and policies, particularly as one who is capable of offering extraordinary healing...healing which creates space for new life and offers hope for a different future!

Today, our focus is upon Jesus as our Mighty God but it is important for us to remember here that Isaiah is not talking about Jesus. Instead, he is foretelling the birth of Israel's future King, Hezekiah. In ancient Israel, the king was a carrier of divine power; and he was to use such power to create a state of shalom, a state of wholeness and well-being, throughout the Kingdom. Kingly Shalom was demonstrated by success in economics, productivity in agriculture, a projection of power that keeps enemies from attacking or assures victory if they do, and providing justice for all the people of the kingdom –citizen and immigrant alike. A lot is expected of a king; and to call the king 'mighty' is to speak of bravery and boldness and courage in the face of every challenge to the order of his kingdom.

Equating Jesus with "God", or naming Jesus "God" –which is a consequence of the Church's long-held reading of Isaiah 9.6 as foretelling Jesus as the messiah, this lofty titling of Jesus as "Mighty God" has never been easy or obvious for the church that formed in Jesus' wake and name, for Jesus saw strength as the exercise of peace.

It takes the development of Trinitarian theology several generations after Jesus' death – with a major bow to Greek philosophy – before the church begins to see Jesus as one part of a three-part Godhead. But as any of us who have tried to understand the Trinity –perhaps as part of our confirmation experience, as we know from our efforts, the Trinity is a complex argument at best, and a tortured grasping-at-straws postulation at worst.

So, in seeking a meaningful way to understand what it is for us to give Jesus the title of 'Mighty God' as we call him our messiah, I want to suggest that we spend some time in the Gospel of Mark, in particular 1.21-28, and 4.35-4. In each of these brief stories, Jesus uses the power he is granted as the messiah, as a 'Mighty God', as the one who offers God's shalom to give new life to others.

In Mark 1, Jesus heals a hurting child of God. In Mark 4, Jesus calms a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee. In each instance, Jesus uses his abundant power with bravery and boldness to make life possible. Contrast Jesus' use of power with that of the dominant force of the prevailing Roman Empire. The Romans practice power that is coercive and exploitative. Their use of power controls or extinguishes life. In contrast, to free a troubled individual from evil spirits, a bold act that is further enhanced by the bravery of healing someone on the Sabbath in front of the Pharisees, who forbid such compassion. Jesus' boldness is further demonstrated by his fearlessness in the face of a potentially deadly storm where he uses his Godly power to create space for life.

These stories from Mark point to Evil Spirits and Overwhelming Storms as forces of Chaos; forces which are attempting to undo the goodness of life that God ordains in creation. Jesus – as a 'Mighty King' confronts these chaotic forces, and boldly commands them to "Come Out" and "Be Still", and in both instances, chaos responds to Jesus with obedience--obedience that creates space for new life--the possessed man is freed to begin living as never before while the terrified disciples are saved so that they may share the Gospel and birth the Church.

Only a "Mighty King"; a messiah of God's own choosing, can create such space for new life! As those who have committed ourselves to follow, Jesus as 'Lord and Savior', as 'Mighty God', we disciples are invited, and we are expected, to imitate Jesus by creating space for new life for those who are threatened by, and being overrun by the forces of chaos in our world.

We are charged with making possible the gifts of healing, and forgiveness, and restoration, and the well-being of love, for those who share creation with us. We are called to run head-first into all the forces of chaos that threaten the goodness of God's creation, and command that they stop, and obey, and depart just like Jesus, who watches over us and those whom we serve as disciples. Now, since we don't have the same "Mighty God" powers of Jesus, our work against the forces of chaos--forces like hate and fear, and bigotry and false confidence--forces like the trashing of our environment, and a lack of compassion and empathy, and the inability to love others--our work against the forces of chaos –all those things that will corrupt and undo and destroy God's good creation if not addressed--our work against the forces of chaos is going to be hard!

We're going to get dirty and scratched up by our efforts. And our progress will be slow and will have to be measured in terms of years, even decades! But when we are about the holy work of making space for life; the holy work of saying to the forces of chaos, 'you have no place in God's good creation'; the holy work of following and serving our Jesus. When we are about the work of our "Mighty God", the only thing the forces of chaos can do is obey and be transformed from forces of death into new life!

Where do we see chaos threatening God's good order today? Unfortunately, in our day, finding life-threatening chaos isn't too hard! But such chaos is where we are called, my friends--called as disciples of Jesus to be hard at work creating space for new life!

So, let's get busy today, this week, this month, following our Jesus. Creating space for new life will bring remarkable results and much needed hope for a different future. Amen!!!

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Walter Brueggemann, *Names For The Messiah*