

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, SERIES B, 1/14/2018

PRINCE OF PEACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, POLAND / CHRIST LUTHERAN, STRUTHERS

Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7.

POWER, PURPOSE, PRESENCE

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Last Sunday, I ended my sermon with a series of questions, which I warned you would be hard, maybe harsh, but I hoped you would think about them, at least for a little bit this week. Here they are again:

Have you ever met someone whom you thought was not worthy of Jesus? Or, to put it another way, have you ever been surprised by the faith of someone whom you didn't think would know Jesus? Has there ever been anyone in your life who was so "alien" in his or her own way, that you didn't think they could receive God's gift of salvation? And how can we make sure that God's Word is proclaimed to all?

I didn't mention that I would bring them up again this morning because I didn't want to scare you away! And, don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to stand up and give your answers here, but I am serious when I ask you to think about these questions. And others like them. Because someday you may be asked those questions or others like them, and folks will expect an answer.

A friend of mine shared with me a time when he and a colleague got into a conversation about salvation. The colleague insisted that unless a person had confessed his or her faith in Jesus that person was going to hell. My friend asked him if that included those who had never heard about Jesus, for example tribes along the Amazon, or maybe even someone in their own town. His colleague was adamant -- it didn't matter -- if they had never heard about Jesus they were doomed. My friend was glad his Lutheran understanding of God's grace allowed for God to make the decisions on salvation, and not his friend.

The questions I raise in worship aren't just intended to be theoretical. They are intended to help all of us, myself included, be ready for those real conversations that people want to have.

Well, on to this week's gospel. Power. Purpose. Presence.

With Jesus' baptism we see God's power at work, we receive a glimpse of God's purpose, and we see God's presence in our world revealed.

First, Power. We know that God is all powerful. We know about the power of God which brought forth creation. We've heard about the power of God which Moses and the Israelites encountered, and the power which the judges and the prophets called upon.

When I think of encountering God's power, I think of the prophet Elijah, sitting in a cave, feeling all alone. We know that Elijah encountered wind, earthquake, and fire, and that God was not in any of those. Elijah met God in the still, small voice. We learn that God's power is not about might or violent action, but about connecting with us.

The power of God is clearly revealed, for example, in the words to Mary from the Angel Gabriel: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

One might think that the power of God would destroy anything it contacts, but here it joins up with Mary to bring about the life which would empower us all.

Today's gospel reading reveals to us another facet of God's power. The power to tear apart the heavens, and to remove the barriers between us and God. The only other time that this word for "torn apart" is used will come at the crucifixion, when the Temple curtain is "torn apart." There, again, God's power removed a barrier between us and God. God seeks to connect with us.

God promises us power -- not our power, but God's power. It's a power which is mighty enough to create the world and tear open the heavens while gentle enough to join with a human to bring new life into the world.

With power comes purpose. Now, in order to understand Jesus' purpose in the gospel of Mark, we need to return to the first verse. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

A person can properly read the rest of Mark's gospel only if she or he is aware of this first verse. This is like the opening of a Columbo murder mystery - where everyone knows "who dunnit" and we are just waiting for Columbo to catch up. The disciples will show us repeatedly that they don't understand who Jesus is or what is his purpose, but for those of us who have seen verse one -- we know.

When we approach the water where John is baptizing, we know what is going to happen. When Jesus comes up out of the water, we know what his purpose is. He is the Christ. The Messiah, the Anointed one. The Son of God. We will not be surprised when Jesus returns from the wilderness and proclaims: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

This is Jesus' purpose: to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. And this is our purpose too. As children of God, people who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, it becomes our purpose also to proclaim the good news. It sounds so simple, but we make it so hard.

I have yet to figure out why we can so easily tell someone about how we lost weight, or cheer madly at a basketball game, or talk about our family or our employment, or just about anything, but we manage to clam up when it comes to sharing the most important news of all.

According to one of our evangelism gurus, it comes down to fear. We are afraid we might be rejected. We are afraid that we won't say the right things or be viewed as a fanatic. We are afraid we will be challenged about our beliefs, or that we won't have the answers to someone's questions. When I read that, I wondered if he had been following me around.

Fear can keep us as individuals from taking on our purpose. So, we need to consider what it is that we are afraid of, and how we can address it. For example, if we are afraid that we might be rejected, let's learn how to accept "no" graciously. Pastor David Daubert noted that when in college his friends would invite him to go with them to church. He repeatedly said no, which they graciously accepted, but they would just as graciously continue to invite him. He finally said yes, not because they had worn him down, but because he was curious about what it was that they found so attractive. It changed his life.

Remember, our purpose is to proclaim the good news. How we, as a congregation, act out that purpose will depend upon our location and the resources that God has given us. Rural and small-town congregations will have a different approach than those of us within urban and suburban cultures. Inner-city and downtown congregations will need to take on different roles than we do in bedroom communities. But we all have one thing in common -- to proclaim the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

As a congregation, then, we must remember that God will empower us and give us the resources that we need for our place and time. The sky is the limit when it comes to possibilities and opportunities, not what we have in our piggy banks or pews.

Power. Purpose. And Presence.

The Baptism of Jesus informs us that Christ is with us. God has come to us in the flesh, and has entered into our world in every way possible. Baptism is just the first step. Immediately after his baptism the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted.

It's sort of the difference between the person who sees a pipe dripping under the sink, says, "Oh, there's a leak," and leaves it to get worse versus the person who sees the leak and places her hands on it to fix it. She's going to get a little wet, maybe a little dirty, but she's become involved with the situation to make it better.

God could have watched from afar and said, "Oh look, they just don't get it." But instead, God came into our world, got wet, more than a little dirty, and became involved with the world, not to fix it, but to redeem it. To serve us. To forgive us. And Jesus has promised us that he will remain present with us.

Power. Purpose. Presence.

The questions I offer today are simply these: When have you encountered God's power in your life? When have you acted on God's purpose for you? When have you been aware of God's presence?

See if you can share your answers with someone else. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we know God's power, purpose, and presence are with us. Now, as graciously as we can, use these tools as God would have us. Amen.