

Advent 2 (B)
Pastor Ed Harkey

Mark 1:1-8
TLC, Keene, NH

[OPENING SLIDE]

**THE HEROES [aka Saints] OF THE SEASON:
NICHOLAS OF MYRA & THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING**

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

“The second Sunday of Advent is a time for all of us ... to remember the humility that comes with honoring our antecedents. If Jesus can admit it, so can we. We all have ancestors in our callings, people who prepared the way.”
(Lillian Daniel, *Feasting on the Word*, 1:46)

As this Advent season gets more and more underway, and we draw ever nearer to the time of Thy coming, O Lord, keep me ever mindful of the task that Thou hast given me to do, with great awe, at handling Thy Word of truth. Set me diligently upon the path of discerning that Word in such a way, that it, first, convicts me, and sets me on the path to life in Jesus' name, so that when I have rightly been guided into all grace and truth, I might embolden and encourage Thy people to walk that Advent road with me. Yes, Lord, seeing in this Gospel a call to repentance, let the reconstruction and renewal begin in me, so that I might bring the Gospel consolation to these whom Thou hast graciously entrusted to my care. Let me do nothing, save lead them to Thee, by Your Word of forgiveness and life. Undeserving as I am of such a great honor or blessing, O Lord, make it so, for Thy sake, and in the name of our Advent King, Jesus, Christ, Son, Savior. Amen.

Introduction

[SLIDE #2] It is Clement Clark Moore who is partially to blame. Writer and professor of Literature, as well as Divinity and Biblical Learning, little did Clark realize how his poem, written to entertain children, would eventually become the narrative of Christmas.

[SLIDE #3]

*“Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there ...*

[SLIDE #4] “A Visit by St. Nicholas.” Now the narrative of he, who at one time, might still have been known and revered as he truly was. Now he is reduced to one *almost* Christ-like ... but far from the “real thing”!

[SLIDE #5] But it just won't do. We can't have Christmas without Christ, or without John's Advent either. Where, John brings us to it. Yes, John, like Nicholas, delivers the true gift of Christmas.

Main Thought: Wherein, He who comes to save makes it all about us! We, not He, are the reason for the season. Where, in taking a journey into the wilderness of our sin, Jesus is glad to meet us there with His grace.

[SLIDE #6]

*"It is all about Me. But I am all about **you!**"*

- Jesus

Amen.

+++

"The Savior is about to arrive and nobody notices anything." So notes Frances Fernandez in his reflection on this Sunday's readings. "The world goes on as usual, completely oblivious," he writes. Where, "the world is in darkness, and few live in expectation of *the Consolation of Israel*." (*In Conversation with God*, 1:67)

[SLIDE #7] Welcome to 30 A.D. ... though it could just as well be 2020. Where the world, for the most part, is still in darkness, and just as few are expecting the consolation of this Israel. Yes, I cannot recall a single reference to the Savior in mainstream media these past ten months – outside of the context of perhaps trying to shut Him down ... to mask and silence Him. But rather, to heed Him, especially the Word of consolation He brings. Few today, as in Jesus' day, expect such an arrival.

[SLIDE #8] John the Baptist did. Given two Sundays in the season of Advent, John arrives on scene to herald that a New Covenant is on the horizon. Indeed, he himself – by God's design – is part of it, with the whole of his life encapsulated in this one thing: to make ready the coming of the Son of God. "*I must decrease,*" he said of himself, "*so that Christ may increase.*" This is why he was born, carrying "out his task to the full, even to the extent of giving up his life in the fulfilment of his vocation." (Fernandez, 68)

How many would come to know of Jesus through John's work? Indeed, it may be, that we ourselves can trace our own spiritual ancestry to this prophet of the Lord ... a gift himself, entrusted with bringing another gift – *the Gift* – to us, to the world.

[SLIDE #9] Not unlike Nicholas of Myra ... also a gift-giver. Perhaps you know his story. [A little history ...] [Drawn from Weedon, *Celebrating the Saints*, 220-221]

Yes, what is important in Nicholas' story is his faith, the confession he made that formed and shaped him as a Christian.

This is what he and John, bring to us, this 2nd Sunday of Advent:

[SLIDE #10] A FACE ... attached to a long-anticipated and hoped for FULFILLMENT of God's Word.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (i.e. “the entire teaching of Christ, our Lord ... law and the proclamation of the mercy and grace of God”¹), ***the Son of God.*** ² ***As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,***
“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³ ***the voice of one crying in the wilderness:***
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight ...’

Let not the brevity of Mark's “Christmas Story” annoy you. Here there is not time for babies, angels, Magi and shepherds. Rather, let these first Words herald what is at hand ... the “good news” culminating another of God's promises fulfilled.

[SLIDE #11] “‘Bear me out,’ Marks is saying, ‘and you will hear the sound of music.’ ... [Listen, and you will hear the] sound the ‘Good News’ of redemptive grace.” [McKenna, *Mark*, 26, 27] Yes, Mark heralds the “good news” (that “of great joy”), heralded by angels, believed on by the Magi, and proclaimed by shepherds! Come to us in our time! To this planet! Wherein, for 400 years, the world was without Word! Waiting ... wondering! And now, it arrives. Jesus arrives ... as does the gift He brings:

¹ *SD*, V, Tappert, pp. 558f.

[SLIDE #12] FORGIVENESS.

⁴ John appeared [“a Biblical Bigfoot or spiritual Sasquatch”²], **baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** **⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem** [by some estimates 300,000 in total³] **were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

What is it, that in proclaiming “*the good news*,” folks are led to want to lay down the bad news of their sin, shame and sorrow?

Not unlike the story following a particular Sunday morning service ... where the pastor stood at the back of the church, in typical fashion, shaking hands with the worshipers as they left.

As one man shook hands, he looked intently at the pastor and said, “Powerful sermon, Pastor. Thoughtful, well researched. I can always see myself in them ... and I want you knock it off.” (MPI, 52)

Or, like my friend Calvin, of *Calvin & Hobbes* fame. Where Calvin says to his tiger friend one day: “I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I’m sorry I did it.” “Maybe you should apologize to her,” Hobbes suggests. Calvin considers the option for a moment and replies, “I keep hoping there’s a less obvious solution.”

[SLIDE #13] For us on this 2nd Sunday of Advent, we cannot [there is not]. No, there is no more obvious solution to sin than this: “Repent, be honest, come clean, unload fruitless patterns of behavior, abandon clever devices for maintaining the illusion of innocence. What could be better news than this ...? (Craddock, et. al. *Preaching through the Christian Year*, B, 13)

² McKenna, *Mark*, 30

³ “Put those numbers into a contemporary perspective. Without advertising, stadiums, amplifiers or satellites, John the Baptist has to be recognized as one of the most successful preachers of all time.” [McKenna]

“If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (I John 1:9)

We, as Advent travelers, must make this journey ... for it is there that grace meets us. Where Jesus meets us! Yes, in our Savior’s arrival, we receive grace. Wherein, John and Nicholas bring us to another gift ... the gift of:

[SLIDE #14] FAITH.

⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Child of God, “what would be the best gift in the entire world? What would be the one thing that would make your life complete?” *[Pause a moment.]* Would it be a new bike, or Xbox? Would it be a new job, a new car, a vacation home (or any home for that matter), a new romance? “There are so many things that we imagine will make our lives just the way we dream they should be. Unfortunately, everything we dream of falls short of *really* meeting the deepest needs of our souls.” (Dugall)

[SLIDE #15] *“I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

Here, identified, is one of our greatest treasures and gifts ... that God can and does work through humble means in order to accomplish the salvation of His people. And in so doing, He brings the greatest gift of all!

Where such a gift finds its source in one place ... one Source, one Fount, one Founder, one Foundation ... Jesus! This is what Advent brings us to: Jesus, Jesus, *only* Jesus! This is the core of Nicholas’ faith ... as also the core of John’s.

“[John] fed on locusts to make his soul grow wings. Sated with honey, the words he spoke were sweeter than honey and of more profit. Clothed in garment of camel’s hair, he exemplified in his own person the holy life.” (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 3.6)

Bringing us finally to heed the call to go forth, to FULFILL God’s will for His own, by our work, and our witness in Jesus’ Name ... a witness that would be “forceful enough to convince those who do not yet believe in Jesus ... those who do not love Him ... those who have mistaken ideas about Him.” (Fernandez, 71) ⁴

These is what John, Mark and Nicholas would bring us to on this 2nd Sunday of Advent:

[SLIDE #16] Our witness ... [if necessary using words] ... true enough! But we must get to the words. We must let the world know who Jesus is. Nicholas did! John most certain did.

Of course, at the end of the day, we don’t bring anyone to faith, really. Rather, God, in His grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit does that. But how joyful – at the end of the day – to know that we serve as our Lord’s vessel ... like John. Wherein, “as nobody can give what he does not have, the effort to grow in our interior life becomes more urgent, so that all those we meet and pass on the road can be infected by our superabundant love for God.” (Fernandez, 73)

Conclusion

“If you were asked to choose the dominant symbol for our generation, what would it be? A flag, a cross, a missile, a TV antenna, a dollar sign, a test tube, an oil barrel, a bloated belly, a handgun, an automobile, a peace symbol?”

⁴ AUGUSTINE: “You know what each of you must do in his own home, with his friend, his neighbor, his servant, his superior, his subordinate. You also know the way in which God provides the opportunity, and the way He opens the door with his word. Do not be content, then, to live at peace with yourselves until you have won them all for Christ, for you have been won for Christ.” (*Treatise on St. John’s Gospel* 10.9)

“My choice,” says David McKenna in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel “would be the sight of a forefinger pointed into the air and accompanied by the chant, ‘We’re Number One.’ The symbol ... where winning has come dangerously close to being everything.” [McKenna, 29]

[SLIDE #17] Reformation artist Matthias Grunewald in his work in the Isenheim Altarpiece would point us to John, who himself, with an open Bible in one hand, with the other, magnified and out of proportion, points to Jesus hanging on the cross ... “*to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*” That is John’s office. That is his purpose, basically to get out of the way “so that we see only Jesus.” (Pless, *CPR*, 19:1, 14)

He is the greatest gift we could ever receive – He who is the human FACE to the fulfillment of God’s promises ... He who embodies God’s Word of FORGIVENESS ... He who brings us to FAITH ... and now sets us to FULFILLING our calling as His witnesses in the world.

[SLIDE #18] This is God’s gift to us, and the gift we might give to one another. Jesus: the gift that keeps on giving!

Amen.