

Sunday, January 7, 2018

Sermon Title: The Beginning

Scripture: Mark 1:1-11

Mark 1:1-11

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”*

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

My husband is always trying to get me to go to a movie. A few weeks ago, he tried to get me to go see “The Last Jedi” with him. Some movies he knows that if he wants to see them in a theater he will have to go by himself. But, he thought he’d give this one a shot. I think he is still in denial over the fact that I have never seen any Star Wars movie, ever. I shot him one of those, “Why would I want to do that,” looks. Why would I want to see movie eight when I have never seen movies one through seven? I don’t know any of the back story. Now, of course, I have heard about Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia over the years, I’ve even seen them at my door on Halloween. But I don’t know the difference between a Yoda and a Jaberwalkie, and I’m still not sure who Darth Vader is talking to when he says, “I am your father,” through his little respirator helmet. So while I might enjoy watching “The Last Jedi” with my husband, there would be a whole lot that I miss, simply because I do not know the back story or the forward story.

I tell you this because it is the best example I can conjure up to explain why I need to spend some time talking to you about Elijah today, especially when there is no mention of him in our text. I assure you, Elijah is present, and knowing this is important for understanding Mark’s introduction of John and Jesus in the opening chapter of his gospel. So, pardon the detour while I share a little of the backstory.

After King David, and after David’s son Solomon, there was a succession of kings that ruled Israel that ultimately led to the division of the kingdom into a Northern and Southern kingdom. That left the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, without a temple, and without a focus for the religious heritage of Judaism. So, as you might imagine, Israel started to drift from the faith. New kings came along that put political expediency above faithfulness. King Omri, had his son Ahab marry a princess, the daughter of the Phoenician king, to create a political alliance that brought peace and stability to the land. Perhaps you have heard the name Jezebel. It has been used throughout history to suggest evil or trouble. Jezebel, wasn’t just a princess, she was also a priestess of Baal. Baal was the God of

lightning, wind, rain and fertility and the patron God of sailors. What is important to know is that Baal is not Yahweh, the God of all creation. Ahab built a temple for Baal in Israel and brought in a bunch of priests and prophets of Baal to run the show.

Enters Elijah, whose name means, “My God is Yahweh,” in Hebrew. We don’t know his history but we do know he is a formidable force. He challenges Baal, he challenges Jezebel and Ahab, and he challenges her priests and prophets. When he meets Ahab for the first time, Ahab says to him, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17). Elijah was the pest that did not rest. He stood up to Ahab and Jezebel. He stood up to power in an attempt to bring God’s people back to God. He stood up to immoral behavior of the highest officials of the land. He about got killed for it, but he prevailed.

A couple of fun facts about Elijah are his appearance, and his departure. When a servant was asked to describe Elijah he said, “A hairy man with a leather belt around his waist.” (2 Kings 1:8). Scholars aren’t sure if he was really a hairy man or wore a haircoat, or if the leather around his waist was a belt or a girdle kind of thing, either way, he was unmistakable. Second, Elijah is one of two characters in the Bible that did not die but was taken up into heaven. Because he did not die, he was available to return.

So now, to complete this backstory, lets turn to the very last chapter of the last book of the Hebrew Bible, Malachi 4:5-6. Malachi tells us, as the Old Testament concludes, that if we return to God, God will return to us. And in conclusion he writes, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day that the Lord comes.”

Even if you didn’t know you needed to know all that – the story of Elijah is fascinating. He was a crazy looking prophet and a world-class troublemaker for politicians not being faithful to the justice of God and God’s commands. It was Elijah that was predicted to return to prepare the way for the Lord’s arrival.

So, Mark begins his gospel, his good news, of Jesus Christ, Son of God, with the return of Elijah. Good news, was language the Romans used when they announced a new king or a big military victory. And Son of God was a title of Caesar Augustus. The political conflict is established in the first verse of Mark’s gospel. John the Baptist is Elijah. Instead of Ahab and Jezebel, John has Herod and Herodias that he challenges.

Mark tells us that John is out in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People from all over, “all of Jerusalem,” Mark tells us, are going out to John to be baptized. You won’t have any trouble recognizing John, he is the one clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist.

The next thing we learn is that Jesus of Nazareth came to John to be baptized. And when he comes up out of the water, Mark makes sure we know that this is the one, this is the one God promised. This is the one who speaks the truth.

But let’s get back to John for a minute. John was a formidable force and a threat to Herod. It is interesting the way the Jewish historian Josephus tells about John’s death, because he was there and writing during this time period. He wrote:

[18.117] For Herod had killed this good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God...[18.118] Now many people came in crowds to him, for they were greatly moved by his words. Herod, who feared that the great influence John had over the masses might put them into his power and enable him to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best to put him to death. In this way, he might prevent any mischief John might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.¹

Like Elijah, John was a known troublemaker. His baptism wasn't just spiritual, it was political. He was organizing people and calling for reform. He wasn't afraid to call wrong, wrong. Scholars now believe that Jesus was an apprentice of John. Whether or not that is true the one thing that Jesus' baptism communicates is, "I'm with him." Jesus baptism is a full endorsement of John and his program for reform. Jesus, through his baptism, identified himself with a known troublemaker, and this foreshadows the trouble Jesus will cause and encounter in his ministry.

After his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness where he faces the temptations that he will oppose throughout his ministry.

Then Mark writes, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news." John prepared people for Jesus. Jesus' message was not the fire and brimstone John expected. But clearly, Jesus' kingdom of God, that he came to proclaim, was a kingdom unlike the empire of Rome, unlike the rule of Ahab, unlike.....you fill in the blank.

Unlike the Star Wars series, the future story of the good news John and Jesus proclaimed, is yet to be written. Some people have never ever thought about John and Jesus as leaders of a grassroots movement calling for social transformation. But the evidence of this fact is undeniable. It also has implications for us and the message we proclaim today as God's people.

I think Elijah comes every now and then to stir God's people to hear afresh God's call for liberty and justice for all and not just a few. In our time, Martin Luther King, Jr., functioned as a prophet and as a troublemaker, refusing to accept inequality and segregation as morally acceptable. When he spoke against Vietnam, he was vilified and attacked for getting off topic. Yet he dared to challenge the militarism of our nation. When he launched the Poor People's Campaign fifty years ago he was mobilizing people to rise up, to speak out, to resist, and to risk for the sake of all God's children. "Evil prevails when good men (all people) fail to act." (MLKJr.)

We are those good people and there is a new Elijah challenging us to act. His name is William Barber II. A preacher, leader and prophet, and a Disciples of Christ minister. He and the Reverend Liz Theoharis are mobilizing people to march on Washington in June and participate in acts of civil disobedience in the days leading up to the march. They are troublemakers to be certain. Stirring up the kind of trouble that would make John smile and Jesus say, "I'm with them."

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at its General Assembly in Indianapolis this summer, passed emergency resolution GA-1740, endorsing Revs Barber and Theoharis and the Poor People's campaign. One of the whereases says, "WHEREAS, while we as Disciples open our hands to the

¹ Flavius Josephus (37-c.100) in *Jewish Antiquities*

poor and engage in direct service, we need to question the policies and practices that keep the poor in poverty. One of the Therefore be it resolved statements says, “BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we encourage all expressions of the church to support the New Poor People’s Campaign: National Call for a Moral Revival in 2018; and through our ministries of prayer and spirit-inspired action, designating resources to fund training, mobilize communities, activate our moral voices in the public square and to continue to serve in the struggle for justice through transformation nationally in both the United States and Canada, and in our local communities...”²

There are moments in history, when leaders rise up and movements swell. We are in one of those moments. It’s not political in that it is democratic or republican, but it is political. As William Barber says, “It’s not about right and left, it’s about right and wrong.”

I’ll be honest, I’m not quite sure where to start, but there are books to read, issues to engage, voices to hear, and information to learn. We will start publishing resources for your consideration. If you want to work with Michelle and me to begin this work, talk to us. We are just beginning the conversation.

Sometimes, making trouble, is exactly what God sends us to do. In the spirit of Elijah may we do just that. May the spirit that filled Jesus at his baptism, fall afresh on us.

² A PDF of the resolution may be found at: <http://ga.disciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/GA-1740-Concerning-Support-for-the-Poor-Peoples-Campaign.pdf>