

2 Advent, Yr. B

December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

There are two ordering devices I would like to use to look at this morning's scriptures. The first is something called a "truth line." And the second is a quote from Frederick Buechner, that the gospel is often bad news before it's good news.

Starting with the idea of a truth line, many of you know Barbara Larsen, a former poet laureate for Door County. A one point we were talking about poetry and she said that she read of a student of poetry who said that each poem had a "truth line," a line that was the core of the whole line, a line which contained the entire meaning. I think we could use that idea when looking at these scriptures.

Starting with Isaiah. You may know that there were probably three individuals writing as Isaiah. First Isaiah, which comprises the first 39 chapters of the book, is about God's anger and the punishment that will befall Israel for failing to live out their part of the covenant. You could say that that was the bad news. What we hear today is the first part of Second Isaiah, who was writing to a people in exile. And what they hear now is the good news: "Comfort, O comfort my people." We could probably talk about what we each think the truth line is in this reading, but I would suggest that it's about mid-way through: THE WORD OF OUR GOD WILL STAND FOREVER. If you know that and believe that and trust that, then you will not only be able to withstand suffering, but you will be eager to prepare the way of the Lord. You'll be eager to fill in the valleys and level the mountains so that all people will see the glory – the presence, the essence, the reality of God. One could read this remembering that when a king was coming, a highway would often be prepared, so that the way was broad and level. But one

could also read this on a different level. What valleys need to be filled in and what mountains need to be leveled so that everyone can finally understand what God's about? Here, surely, we can think of the valleys of despair, inequality, poverty, suffering – everything that keeps people enslaved and incapable of flourishing. And the mountains to be leveled? How about all the obstacles, once again, to everything that stands in the way of the coming of God's kingdom – here we could think of greed, selfishness or indifference to the suffering around us.

The truth line in the psalm has to be in verse 11: TRUTH SHALL SPRING UP FROM THE EARTH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS SHALL LOOK DOWN FROM HEAVEN. You'll remember the concept of the LOGOS which was found in Greek philosophy and which John used in the fourth Gospel. The Logos could be seen as the truth, the reality, that's embedded in the very structure of the universe. I like to think about gravity – that's a physical truth. You can deny it all you want, but if you drop something it's going to hit the ground. Thinking of it theologically, it's that God's truth – that creation is GOOD, that we are all members of the same family, that love is stronger than hate and stronger than death – that's the truth that will ultimately prevail in spite of the efforts of some to deny it and work against it.

In Peter's letter, I'm thinking the truth line is that even in the midst of the heavens passing away and the elements of the earth melting with fire, we, ACCORDING TO GOD'S PROMISE, CAN WAIT FOR NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH, WHERE RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL BE AT HOME.

And then there's Mark. This is the very beginning of the first Gospel. And that's what he says in the opening line; THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD. A couple of comments here about the language. First, "good news" at the time

Mark was writing didn't mean a gospel book. In his context, a Jewish context, the good news was that God was coming to deliver his people. On the secular level, good news meant PAX ROMANA – that good news of the peace brought by the emperor. And then there's something else to note – the use of the word CHRIST. I've pointed out before the Christ was not Jesus' last name, but was a title, in Greek it was Christos, the anointed one, in Hebrew, it was the messiah. So the reader knows from the beginning who this Jesus is. It's interesting that Mark's gospel is full of the Messianic secret. When Jesus performed a miracle, he often told his disciples not to tell. A bit paradoxical in light of this first line. But it's been pointed out that as the gospel proceeds and the disciples continue to bumble, not getting who Jesus was, one effect of that for the knowing reader can be a deepening of faith: Wait! I know who Jesus is! Why can't you get it?

It helps to remember that Mark was writing about the time when the Romans were crushing another Jewish rebellion. The country was in turmoil, with divisions and factions everywhere. On one side were the Jewish Zealots, on the other, those that supported Rome. There were the Jews against the Gentiles. Jesus' followers were being condemned as heretics by the rabbis and as cowards and losers by the zealots. But Mark, writing in this context, says: IT'S NOT ABOUT REVOLUTION, IT'S ABOUT REPENTANCE. He quotes Isaiah about preparing the way. And we prepare the way, says John, by repenting, by turning back to God, by living in the way God wants us to live, with Kingdom values. So, here too the message is bad news first: you've sinned, you need to repent. I'm always fascinated by the fact that the text says that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. Why, do you think? Would you have gone? Did they go because somehow they knew, deep down, that the bad news, the need for repentance was true? But then there was that cleansing baptism in

the River Jordan and the promise of the coming baptism with the Holy Spirit. Good news in the end. It's been said that to really understand Jesus, we need to understand his Jewish roots. And here it helps to know that there was an underlying question for the Jews: before we ask God to deliver us, we need to ask whether we are fit to stand before a righteous God. A question for today as well.

All of this can be a bit heady, so let me conclude with a story that I think illustrates all of this – the truth line and the fact that, while bad news comes before good news, good news is the ultimate truth.

The story was in the Anglican Digest and it's written by a Mom. She belongs to a church that had a ministry to the homeless. They offered dinner, shelter and breakfast. She had signed up to help at an evening meal and was accompanied by her 3-year son, Alex. When she had picked him up at day care, he had proudly announced that he had managed to stay down for the entire nap period, which was something they had been working on for a long time. In fact, she said, she had finally resorted to that time-honored parental method: bribery. It seems he had desperately wanted a pair of GREEN Power Range sneakers for a long time and that bribe worked. She said that the two of them had to try 5 stores before they found the right ones – the green ones. He put them on and they raced to the church. While she made the spaghetti sauce, Alex showed the new sneakers to everyone he could corner. That night a lot of families showed up. There was one young woman who stood out because her young son looked absolutely terrified. When the mom asked about her, she was told that the woman and her son had fled their home the night before and, because the shelters were all full, they had been sent to the church. It turned out that the little boy wasn't eating because he was so traumatized by the whole thing, so she invited them into the kitchen so the kids could eat together. Soon the two boys had broken the ice and were

chattering and eating. The little boy's name was Darius and he was in awe of Alex's green sneakers. After every bite, he'd reach over and touch them. At one point, Alex said, "Maybe your Mom could get you some green Power Ranger sneakers, too!" After dinner, Alex was telling his mom about the encounter and his hope that Darius' mom would get him the sneakers. She explained why that wasn't going to be possible – that they didn't have any money, not even a place to live. Alex didn't say anything, he just wandered off to play. When they were getting ready to leave, he came up and said, "Mom, if I give Darius my sneakers, will you carry me to the car?" She was stunned and asked him if he was sure he wanted to do that. He replied by saying, "Yeah, I have lots of stuff; he doesn't even have a house. I think Jesus would want me to give him my shoes." And so he did. The adults who were watching were moved to respond in kind – someone found the young family an apartment, someone else found the young mother a job and someone donated enough money for Darius to join the church's day care.

Is there a truth line there? What about, "Mom, if I give Darius my sneakers, will you carry me to the car?" Whatever you say about this story, surely you can say that this is a picture of bad news being redeemed by good news and that it's yet another blessed picture of the Kingdom. Amen.