

Isaiah 40: 1-11; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; Mark 1: 1-8  
Olivet Church, C'ville, Dec. 10, 2017

### *God's Word Endures*

Jason is a chaplain whose ministers with palliative care patients. So he spends a great deal of time at the bedsides of those who are very near death. One day someone asked him, "What is it like to spend so much time with people who are dying?" Jason thought for a moment, and then with a wry smile replied, "Well the truth is, both of us spend all our time with people who are dying. The only difference is, the people I'm with know it."

You may be aware that with astronomer Edwin Hubble's discovery that the universe was rapidly expanding, physicists began to postulate a "big bang" beginning to the cosmos that corresponds to the Christian view of the creation of earth and heaven at some point in time. And though I am well out of my field in speaking about it, astrophysicists now postulate, as the Bible does, an ending of various possibilities described with terms like "big freeze", "big crumple", and "big bounce." I suppose an astrophysicist could say, "we all spend time in a world that is coming to an end. The only difference is, the people I work with know about it."

We might say, as people of faith, informed by scripture, "we know about it." The scriptures acknowledge the reality of death, and the end of this world with its injustice, war, terrorism, evil, and suffering. But the scriptures and our faith speak of a future; a future life and a future world secured in "God's word which endures forever." Humans are like the grass and the flower which wither, die, and blow away. And this world, which to us seems so permanent will come to an end. Perhaps it will happen, as the physicists might describe it, with a slight change of the Higgs energy field force, which is currently miraculously calibrated to enable atoms to form, matter to exist, and a creation replete with rocks and trees, skies and seas, and humans to be present rather than not be. Peter, drawing on his Jewish apocalyptic heritage, describes the day when "the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire." But, he continues with the promise, "we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home."

Physicists know there is a relationship between energy and matter; or as people of faith would put it, between spiritual and material things. It's not hard to imagine the spiritual energy of God's word bringing the universe into being. God spoke, "let there be light, and there was light." It's not a stretch to imagine the power of God's word bringing a new heaven and new earth into being after the old one dissolves and is no more with Christ's return. The challenge for us may be less intellectual than emotional; less a matter of the mind than of the heart. Will we trust in God's word, in God's promises?

Of course God has continued to send out his word, speaking to God's people and world; most fully in God's Son, Jesus Christ. "The word that was with God from the beginning, through whom all things were created, became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth," the gospel writer John says in his prologue. Mark echoes the "beginning" spoken of at the start of Genesis, as he speaks of the "beginning" of the "good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." But as we read Mark's "beginning," we quickly realize that the beginning is not just in Jesus' stepping onto the stage of human history; but includes the word of God spoken through the

prophets Isaiah and Malachi; and the word of God borne by John the Baptist the herald, the forerunner of the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Though God will bring to fulfillment the good news of new and eternal life. And God will bring to fulfillment the good news of a peaceable kingdom in Christ, a new world where righteousness is at home. It has already begun. It is already present among us. It already invites, even demands a response. It is to be embraced and lived into now. It is not something we wait for, something that can only be enjoyed after we die, or after Christ returns. "In Christ we are new creations" Paul tells us. We have "died with him through baptism that we might walk in newness of light." In Christ we have been reconciled to God, transferred out of darkness into light and into the kingdom of his Son. We have begun to live in the sphere of influence and power of God's Spirit. Our values, behavior, and lives are no longer to be shaped by the fallen, sin-warped culture and world around us. We are no longer to be conformed to the ways of the world. Rather we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, to live our lives as testaments to the new life and kingdom that God has opened up for us in Christ.

Advent is a season of renewal in that new life we share in Christ and his kingdom through reflection, prayer, rituals, and repentance. It is no coincidence that the color for the season is purple, like that of Lent. Purple is the color of penitence. It is a season to embrace practices that will enable us, like the characters Mitch, Phil, and Ed in the movie "City Slickers," to get all of the kinks and knots out of our rope; to get our smiles back; to discover the true foundation for our lives. It is a season to make corrections to the pattern, the focus, the direction of our lives. G. K. Chesterton said that if you are on the wrong road, the worst thing you can do is move along more quickly. You may have heard that joke about the pilot who comes on the intercom and says, "I have good news and bad news, folks. The bad news is that we're totally lost; the good news is that we are making excellent time!"

When experiencing despair and hopelessness in exile the prophet Isaiah proclaimed the promise and good news of homecoming to God's people; announcing that God would build a royal, super highway so that they could return home with utmost ease and speed. The wilderness would not slow, imperil, nor harm them and God would show strength with his arm and would carry and lead God's sheep with gentleness.

But over 500 years later the people do not bypass the hazards and insecurity of the wilderness in order to get to their true home. Rather they are led out of their cities, synagogues, homes, and places of security and comfort to go to the wilderness to spend time with John the Baptist there. And unlike the first entry into the Promised Land when God's presence in the Ark of the Covenant parted the waters of the Jordan River so that the people of God passed through on dry ground. This time they are taken into the Jordan River. They are put under its waters. They are cleansed, purified, and given new life through baptism as they respond to and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Why the change? Why the need to go to the wilderness, rather than through the wilderness, to get to our true home. Why the need to go into the Jordan in a ritual of cleansing and dying, rather than walking on dry ground?

Could it be that the new life is not a mere continuation of the old? Could it be that the new world and kingdom is not merely a renovation or rehabilitation of the old? But rather, as Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, the old life cannot put on immortality, and the old world cannot contain the fullness of the beauty, glory, justice, and peace of the new.

After all, repentance, “metanoia” in the Greek, is not merely feeling sorry for bad things we have done. Rather it is a change of heart, perspective, values, direction, and life. It is embracing our lives and our futures in the new life and new world of God’s enduring word. It is “leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, when the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire. But, in accordance with his promise, new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” will appear.

Which may mean that amidst all of our preparation for Christmas we must go to the wilderness. Which for some of us may mean just going somewhere where we can simply be still, be quiet, be undistracted and spend some time with God. For some of us it may simply mean confronting with more directness the wilderness that we have known in our lives through loss, illness, trauma, and failure. For some of it may simply mean going to a wilderness like place where the elements we feel so vital to happiness are missing: like a prison, a dementia unit in a nursing home, a shelter for abused persons, a soup kitchen. See if in the wilderness place, under the advent admonition of John to repent, you might start singing “O come, o come Emmanuel” with your heart as well as your lips. You might start praying, “give us lord our daily bread” remembering that we do not live by bread alone but every word that proceeds from our God. You might sing with tears in your eyes and a bursting heart, “Joy to the World, the Lord is Come.” You might with conviction, a sure and certain hope in the future life and world of righteousness, live today in the power and promise of tomorrow.