

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'

+INJ+

It is a strange thing. During the season of Advent, we speak of the 'coming of the Lord', for the word 'advent' means nothing but 'to come near.'

Yet last week, during the First Sunday of Advent, we read of Christ's second coming. Now on the Second Sunday of Advent, we read of His first.

For now John the Baptist, the elder cousin of Jesus, and a prophet of God goes forth into Judea to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, baptizing all who will repent of their sins, declaring that *one is coming who is mightier than him, who will baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.*

This he preaches in order to fulfill what is written in the prophet Isaiah, *'Behold, I will send my servant before you, who will prepare your way.'*

John comes to preach the Gospel. Yet we rarely ask ourselves what exactly a 'Gospel' is. We tend to use it a title, as when we talk about 'the Four Gospels.' We use it as if it were a kind of genre of biblical literature.

Some take it to mean a specific teaching that we find in the Scriptures, perhaps that the 'Gospel' is the doctrine that we are saved by grace, through faith, in, with, and for Christ, apart from the works of the Law.

But neither of these fit how the term 'Gospel' is used in the New Testament itself, and understandably so, for the Bible never really defines the term. It just throws it out at us, as if we should already know what this peculiar word should mean.

The Gospel is *'declared,'* first by John, then by Jesus. But what is it?

The Gospel is commanded, that we should *'repent and believe the Gospel, for the*

kingdom of heaven is at hand.' But what is it?

The Gospel is given over to the Apostles, that they might *go and preach the Gospel to all nations*. But what is it?

Again, it seems the Word of the Lord would assume that we knew the meaning of this term that appears over and over again so much so that it need never explain it.

Indeed, it is the first word of what is arguably the oldest of the books we call 'Gospels,' the book of Mark. *'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'*

It should seem curious to us, that as Christians, we have spent all our lives, or at least some large portion of it, knowing that we should 'hear the Gospel,' 'believe the Gospel,' 'preach the Gospel.'

Yet when asked to define the Gospel, we pinch our brow a little bit, like when an overly inquisitive child repeatedly asks 'why' to a simple question so many times that at some point, you don't even know why. You, in your frustration, just respond tersely to the kid, 'it just is! Okay?' [Or if you are a little more pious, 'Because God made it that way!']

Yet the Scriptures are not trying to confuse us. The fact is, the Word really does just expect us to know what the term 'Gospel' means for a simple reason, when the Bible was written, everyone just did.

Now some may have heard this word we have been speaking of is simply Greek for 'good news.' But this does not do it justice, for when we think of 'good news,' we think of everything from 'we didn't burn the turkey this time,' to 'congratulations, you have a healthy baby girl.'

But to the ancients, 'good news' meant something very specific.

The Romans believed that the founder of their eternal city, Romulus, after having killed his brother for mocking him, populated Rome with whoever he could convince to come. These were largely criminals, ruffians, thugs, and low lives; and as is common in all times and places, such tend to be male.

With so many crass men now living in his city, they had a simple problem: these

men need wives.

Now it is the way of women that they tend not to seek out for their lifelong spouse broke jerks with a rap sheet; neither are they wooed by their proposals, so Romulus had to concoct a new plan, what a certain Slavic autocrat today might call a 'special military operation.'

The people neighboring ancient Rome were known as the Sabines, a noble people. Romulus invited these people to a great celebration to commemorate the founding of his new city, complete with feasts and games and theatre. And so the Sabines came, for everyone likes a good time.

Yet it was not at all what it seemed, for at Romulus' signal, every Roman present at this festival would grab the nearest Sabine woman, pick her up, and drag her back to their home to be forcibly married to their captor.

The plan worked, the Sabine women were taken away, and were wedded to these men. Thus is the story of the Rape of the Sabine Women.

Yet the story does not quite end here. The Sabine men, naturally, plan their revenge, and train for a good time to invade Rome and retrieve their stolen wives and daughters and sisters.

Finally the day came when the Sabines attacked. They overtook the walls of Rome, and pressed the Romans all the way back to their city's Capitol. Romulus himself was even gravely injured. Yet Romulus, in this moment of panic, cried out to the god Jupiter that if the deity gave him the victory over the Sabines that day, he, and all his successors, would dedicate their lives eternally to bringing salvation to the world in the form of peace and the order brought by law.

The battle was turned, and the Romans began to win, when, in the end, the conflict was suddenly ended by none other than the Sabine women themselves. But this is a story for another day.

From then on for a thousand years, the Romans would fight endless wars on every frontier to, in their minds, conquer the nations, redeeming these people from their barbarism, and bringing to them the 'peace of the Romans,' or what we sometimes hear called, the *Pax Romana*.

Whenever the Roman army, having gone out to war, would defeat a rival nation,

conquering them and having them submit to Roman rule, they would immediately send a messenger back to Rome to declare that 'peace' had been brought to yet another people of this great world. The term for the message that 'peace' had reached yet another nation through Roman arms and battle, was called a 'gospel,' 'good news,' the good news that a little bit more of the world had been ripped from the tyranny of barbaric kings, and brought under the orderly, civilized, and harmonious *imperium* of Rome.

A Gospel, then, is just this, it is a message of conquest, of victory, and of triumph, over all that stands against the rule of heaven. It is to put to death the gods of the heathen, and bring them to the kindly governance of the true gods.

Now St. Mark begins his Gospel most interestingly. '*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*'

Mark is therefore proposing something truly seditious, even traitorous to the Roman rule he lived under, for He proposes that there is a different Gospel, a different victory, and a different rule, that will bring peace to mankind.

It is not the Gospel of Rome, nor of Jupiter, nor of any people. Rather, it is the good news of the conquest of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God; the one, true and only power.

Our Lord is first revealed to us only as *Jesus of Nazareth*. Yet in time, St. Peter will recognize Him as *the Christ*, and finally at the crucifixion, the Roman soldier, the one who had dedicated himself to the Gospel of Rome, will himself proclaim the Crucified One, as *the Son of God*. In but a few words, of the first book, written by the first Evangelist, the entire content of the entire Bible is summarized. The end of the conflict which plagues mankind's life, which plagues his soul, which plagues his innermost being; this has come to an end, for the good news of final victory in Christ has come.

What is made clear in the New Testament, is foreshadowed, as always, in the Old; for remember the first words of our Old Testament reading for this day, how it looks forward to this joy to the world:

*'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

that her warfare is ended.'

+INJ+

Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8.