



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday January 15th, 2017 – Epiphany II

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; as it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.”

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

We use this word “gospel” a lot. We refer to the first four books of the New Testament as the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John; that is, we refer to the accounts of Jesus’ teaching as the “gospel.” We also refer to the whole of Christian doctrine as the Gospel. And we Christians don’t have a corner on the market with the word, either. If somebody wants to assure you that their friend or associate is trustworthy, they’ll tell you “you can take what she says as gospel.” Likewise, if you want to carefully avoid culpability in something, you can tell somebody “hey, I’m not sure about this, don’t take what I said as gospel.” And if we’re absolutely certain about something, whether it’s something we hold as a deep theological truth, or simply the most efficient way to swap out a master cylinder in an old car, we call something “the gospel truth.”

It’s a pretty diverse word, but in applying it broadly, we make it easy to forget what it really means, and why it’s really so important. We get “gospel” from the Old English (that is, the language of the Anglo-Saxons up to about 1150 AD), phrase “gōd-spell” which means “good news or glad tidings.” And that Old English phrase is a direct word-for-word translation of the Greek “euangelion” (you-un-gelion) or “good message;” the “good message” is the offer of redemption made to the whole world by the life

and death of Jesus of Nazareth. So when Mark opens up this “gospel” by saying “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” he’s not merely applying a title to his record of events - he’s literally telling us “this is the start of the redemption offered to the whole world in the blood of Christ.”

And it starts here with the paraphrasing of the words of the prophet Malachi (*“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me”*) and the prophet Isaiah (*“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God”*) to describe the work of John the Baptist. The work of John is really the start of the whole Christian movement, and in his ministry, John is known chiefly for two things: preaching the baptism of repentance and prepping all of Judea for the arrival of the Messiah, and for baptising Jesus in the Jordan River. The good news here starts with Jesus’ obedience to Jewish customs and requirements, by being baptized.

Surely, God incarnate had no sins to be cleansed of; but Jesus became one of us in every way, and in order to not only perfectly fulfill His mission, but to also be beyond reproach while doing so, He was obedient in every possible way. We must remember what the apostle Paul said in 1 Cor 15: *“The first man Adam*

was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit." Where Adam failed in obedience, Jesus is perfectly obedient to the Law and the will of the Father, that His redeeming work for us can be complete in every way. And God blesses that obedience - the Spirit of God in the form of a dove descends from Heaven, and the voice of God says "*Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*"

In His perfect obedience, Jesus opens us back up to being in communion with God. And He shows us that obedience to God still matters, even though we live under grace and not the law; even though we live under a new and everlasting covenant, and are not bound by the ceremonial and sacrificial Law that the Hebrews observed in order to obey God. If Jesus, God incarnate, still sees fit to be obedient despite the fact that *all things were made through Him and for Him*, certainly we the created things can at least attempt to imitate that obedience.

While the core of the good news is that our sins are forgiven, we are still expected to adhere to the God's laws; let's not forget the words again of Paul in the sixth chapter of his epistle to the Romans: "*Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? **God forbid.***" That being the case, another element of the good news is that Christ has given us the perfect model for grace and obedience. "I was one of you and I did this; you can too. At least give it your A game, as I've already picked up the slack."

The gospel, the good news, isn't just that our sins are forgiven. It isn't just that we are no longer consigned to a permanent separation from God due to our own inequities. The good news is a whole new modality, a new way of life, offered through Christ's life, through the life He modeled for us. It is a radical thing that has permeated all aspects of our lives. It has seeped into every nook and cranny of Creation and makes all things whole. Every tragedy we suffer through, every one of our own sins we grieve, every quiet desperate moment we have, has been affected and blessed by this good news, even when we struggle to find it. The gospel surrounds us at all times, we just need to embrace it and cling to it as the only thing that brings us true peace.

There was a lot of joking about how excited most of America was for 2016 to end. Between a divisive and ugly political season, and the deaths of some of our most treasured musicians and creative folks, people

everywhere were anxious for 2017 to arrive. And while that's a fine thing to joke about, 2017 isn't going to be without trial or struggle or pain. While I am by no means a pessimist or a fatalist, when 2017 rolled around I remembered my favorite poem by Archibald MacLeish which always seemed a morbid yet cheeky summary of our lot in life while we inhabit these bodies:

"Around, around the sun we go:
The moon goes round the earth.
We do not die of death:
We die of vertigo."

Simply put, pinning our hopes on the mere increase of the number in the present year is a pretty vacant thing to pin our hopes upon. Pinning our hopes on the salvation freely offered by Christ, and the perfect model He gave us for living however, is a bit of a different story; it is a perfect hope.

While John's ministry ended with his imprisonment and martyrdom, his work is a work that still needs to be done today - "*Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*" Because while John paved the way for Christ's ministry, there's still plenty of work to be done paving the way for His return. We make straight the path of the Lord when we are obedient to Christ; when we bless those who curse us, and pray for those who persecute us. We make straight the path of the Lord when we give Jesus room to work in our Lives and vigilantly keep ourselves open to His will. When we, who are inhabitants of a world that has become violently hostile to religion, and to Christianity especially, dare to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness; when we dare to proclaim Christ crucified and Christ resurrected.

We make straight the path of the Lord when we remove roadblocks to our witness; when we remove greed and pride and retribution from our lives in obedience to God, and are able to give a credible accounting of why our hopes are pinned to the cross. And while we can not aspire to the greatness of John, who was both the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first person in the New Testament to recognize Christ, we can share with him his wonderful work: "*Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.*" **Amen**