

United Methodist Church
Solon, IA

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Rev. C A Kress

December 4, 2011
2nd Sunday of Advent

Let's get ready, a Savior's coming

Scripture: Mark 1:1-8

Prayer:

Well, how many more days to Christmas? The waiting game is on. But what does it mean to wait – what does it really mean? I know that some families have pulled out the fisher price nativity set and the children have been playing with it – repeating the story again and again. And some of us have been over-dosing with the Christmas music already. We're finding our way to Christmas.

And it's such a great story. But we're studying the beginning of the gospel of Mark today and this gospel is unique in that there is no story of Christmas here. He just skips right over all that the story of Jesus and his birth fore-shadows and hops right into the middle of his life. Mark is going from standing still to 3rd gear without shifting through the gears. (We're going to talk a bit more about keeping pace during Christmas in just a minute.)

But from standing still to getting into a dead run so quickly, Mark's telling of the gospel doesn't zero in on the adult Jesus right away. He first takes us through the story of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. And John is just this amazing prophet – a Billy Graham kind of character who tells the faithful it's time to change their ways and get themselves ready for the real thing – the Christ who is soon to come.

When I was reading the gospel story in preparation for today I was struck by something which I had never really considered about this text before. But it occurs to me that the story is symbolic of something that's true for all of us. There's always someone who comes before us. Our faith begins with the faith we see (or saw) in someone else. In scripture before Jesus entered the scene, John the Baptist prepared the way. But John's ministry was fore-shadowed by Elijah and the prophets, they followed the example of Moses and so the story goes down the line to the beginning.

I suppose we are standing in this huge section which is called the 'middle ground' – we can look at all these generations that stand before us and be thankful. And we can pray for all those generations which will follow us that the faith we pass on to them will be something worthy to share.

My grand parents and parents were never ones to wear their faith on their sleeves. We didn't do a lot of devotional reading or praying in our house. But, what we did is sing. I've mentioned before that mom played and led the choir at the Brandon church for about 25 years. So, for my family the hymnal and various gospel singers and song books important. We sang our faith, and to this day there are times when a certain Christian song is in my mind and won't leave it. When that happens I believe God's trying to tell me something.

So, the question becomes, how will we prepare the way for those who are following us so that their faith will be strong? How will we do that? Perhaps we begin by focusing upon our own walk with Christ and giving him the space and place to enter into our lives and to just be present within us.

(pause)

I'm shifting gears because I want to share an e essay which was written by a clergy-colleague of mine by the name of Anna Bladel. She's serving at the Cottage Grove United Methodist Church in Des Moines.

She writes: "I know a pastor (perpetually busy, engaged in vibrant ministry, always running from one thing to the next) who signs each e-mail 'Grace and peace.' She's echoing the greeting that the apostle Paul offered during his itinerant ministry.

“Grace and peace.”

Recently she slipped up in the Pauline benediction. “Grace and PACE,” she wrote. What a difference that one letter makes.

As we count down the final days of December is it PEACE or PACE guiding our lives?

Is PEACE or PACE structuring our days, shaping our prayer lives, motivating our events. Have we found peace or pace?

“Keep alert,” Mark’s gospel implores. “Keep awake.” It is hard to be alert to God’s coming near or the Spirit’s drawing close when our focus on PACE pushes past the anticipated birth of the Prince of Peace.

When Pace threatens peace, can we turn back to the reason for the season and focus our eyes on that manger and take a deep breath.

Advent is a season of waiting, watching, anticipating, expecting, longing for God to draw near...so near... birthed into human flesh and human community. As Patricia De Jong writes, “At Advent, God’s people summon the courage and the strength to remember that the Holy is here and now.

Yesterday I almost missed the Holy breaking into my day because of my pace. I was running a few errands in Cedar Rapids with my friend Brenda. We were rushing across a crosswalk (dodging rain drops), I stumbled over a crack. I didn’t fall, I just stumbled enough for Brenda to grab me. But we both looked up and around. And this art shop had a painting hanging in the window. It was big and bright and we had missed it. But because we were stopped there on the sidewalk, Brenda and I saw it at the same time. It was a picture of a nun dressed in a black habit. She playing a fiddle and her big black skirt was swirling as she danced. All the music was bright and colorful rays that radiated from her fiddle. The picture was entitled, “Make a joyful noise before the Lord.”

Oh yes, there was a lot of joy in that image. A bit of God’s great joy touched us.

Brenda and I just needed to stop, pause and look around long enough to actually see. If we had kept trucking along at the pace we were going, We would have missed all the joy God wanted to share.

Peace or pace?

A God big enough to take the form of a tiny baby, a God powerful enough to choose to experience the vulnerability of human bodies, a God strong enough to enter into the celebration and suffering of birth, death, rebirth and all of life that flows between.

Does your pace leave space enough to anticipate all of this? Does your pace allow your heart space to prepare room for the Christ child who is on the way?

As the Advent season unfolds, as we hang our greens and light our wreaths and plan our pageants and rehearse our choirs and carol with our church family and serve meals and tend to lonely hearts and enjoy school concerts and attend the program for the children (here, at school, recital....), decorate our trees, arrange our nativities, write our Christmas cards and do it all – may we find space, create room for God to draw near, and for a baby to be born. May the Holy One draw near.

Grace and PEACE.