

Mark 1:1-8

The Baptism of our Lord (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Genesis 1:1-5; Romans 6:1-11; Mark 1:4-11

Remembering the Beginning

January 7, 2018

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’ ” John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

This is our first Sunday together now that the calendar declares this to be the year AD 2018. Does that mean anything? It’s just a number. Orthodox Jewish people think of January 1st as part of the year 5778—and I know that the Royal Bank used to produce calendars for its customers following this numbering system. For Muslims, it is the year 1439; and for the Chinese it is the Year of the Dog.

What is so significant about the numbers on the calendar? If it weren’t for the struggles we have remembering to change the date when we are writing cheques, we probably wouldn’t give it a whole lot of thought. The last time there was any real excitement with a new year was when we came into the new millennium in the year AD 2000. It’s the same kind of excitement that comes when the odometer on your car hits 100,000—it’s just exciting to see all of those zeros.

I wonder if people truly understand the significance and meaning behind the numbering system that we use on our calendar. A surprising number of people have no idea of why our calendar is numbered as it is. They don’t know what the AD on the calendar stands for—that it means *anno Domini*—in the year of the Lord. What is worse is the fact that there are an even greater number of people who have no idea who that Lord is.

The coming year gives us a wonderful opportunity to follow in the stead of John the Baptist, and to talk about our faith, and about the events that happened over 2,000 years ago. We have an opportunity to declare to a world that is troubled and uncertain about the future what the Lord of all history has done in the fulness of His time, for the sake of the people He loves with a love that transcends all time and history. We have an opportunity to help our world—and ourselves, for that matter—to prepare for each new day and each new year, as we go back to the beginning, and remember the Lord who came to bring to dying sinners like you and me the forgiveness, life, and salvation that is our hope and joy for all the years of our life.

St. Peter said: *“in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”* (1 Peter 3:15, ESV) In the same way, we might say today: always be ready to explain to everyone the reason why this year is AD 2018. What is it that became so important that it became the anchor for the calendar for more than 2 millennia? Any student of history is used to dating things either in terms of BC or AD. But the people of 2018 BC had no idea that they were living in the year 2018 BC. Typically, dating was done by finding an anchor point, usually tied to the beginning of some famous figure or to a political ruler’s reign. In the days of the Roman empire, and into the days of the Holy Roman Empire, most dating was done based on the year when the city of Rome was founded. Dates were also typically tied to the year of accession of a given Roman emperor, especially Diocletian, who was a vicious persecutor of the church. But in our year AD 525, Pope John I wanted a solution to the problem of how to calculate the proper Sunday on which to celebrate Easter. He assigned the task to a monk-mathematician by the name of Dionysius Exiguus, who did not want to remember the evil emperor Diocletian, persecutor of the church. Dionysius felt it more appropriate to number the years since the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

It is the result of His work that has left us with the calendar we use today. In redoing the calendar, however, Dionysius made an innocent mistake. He dated the birth of Christ in the year 753, counting from the founding of Rome. But Herod the Great, the king who asked the wise men to tell him where the Christ was born, actually died in 749. Since Herod was alive when Jesus was born, the true date of Christ's birth had to be some months before Herod's death—meaning that Christ was actually born somewhere around 5 BC. Regardless of the numbers, though, we still date our entire history from one point: from the year of our Lord—the time it was believed that Jesus Christ was born.

Why should this one event be so important? Why remember, as one historian has said, the birth of a baby who was born in an obscure village in a backward part of the Roman empire, who grew up to be a religious reformer; who preached for three years before being put to death as a nuisance by the Roman authorities? Mark puts it into perspective in our text. What we remember is *the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. We remember the good news: that, in keeping with His wonderful plan, when the time was right, God fulfilled the promises He had made to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Moses, and to all His people throughout history. God Himself came into our world in human flesh and blood. He came to save; He came to redeem a lost and dying world. He came to rescue sinners like you and me from the fate that awaits us without Him. He came to save us from sin, death and hell. That was the message that John the Baptist came to declare to the people of Jerusalem and Judea: God had kept His promise. Messiah was coming. It was time for a fresh start. And so John spoke to the people of their sinfulness and their need for repentance. He baptized those who confessed their sins as a sign of that repentance. But John knew that his ministry was just a drop in the bucket compared to the One who was coming after him. *“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

If there is a message that still needs to be proclaimed today, and perhaps even more so in this year 2018, it is that the Saviour whose coming John announced has come to take His place with us. In His Baptism, Christ came to stand beside, to stand in our stead, and to carry out the work that would unite us with Him in His death for us, that we can also be united with Him in His resurrection from the dead. Christ was born for us. He was baptized for us. He lived and died for us. He rose from death and lives to bless us in our days, as we cling to Him in faith. That makes the coming year a reason to celebrate, to remember His coming and to go out into the world like John the Baptist and to tell others what God has done. This year, like every year, is *anno Domini*—the year of the Lord. With every passing year, the need to declare the year of the Lord's favour becomes more and more important. There have been many, especially in the last century, who thought that God was passe, that we had outgrown our need for Him. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche said, in 1882 that God was dead. People like George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells though that the 20th century would mark the close of history's religious phase. I won't deny that things are getting tougher and tougher for God's church, but His church is still alive and well. Yes, it is being attacked both from without and from within. But the God who created the world; the God who said, *“Let there be light,” and there was light.* (Genesis 1:3, ESV) continues to bring His light to this dark world. The gospel of Jesus Christ still brings hope and life to people burdened with the reality of their sins. And it will endure, for as many days, weeks and years that this world may have.

And so we enter into this new year in the same way that the people of God have faced each new day over the generations. We do it with the assurance that our God is with us. He is still at work to accomplish His purposes. We prepare for what is ahead, by remembering what happened at the very heart of our calendar: God came to our world. He came to save us. He has given us the hope of the Gospel—that good news of forgiveness and life in Christ. We have that message in our hearts and lives. We have it through our baptism into Christ. It is our strength and stay for all our days. And it will be our hope for all our tomorrows. Amen.