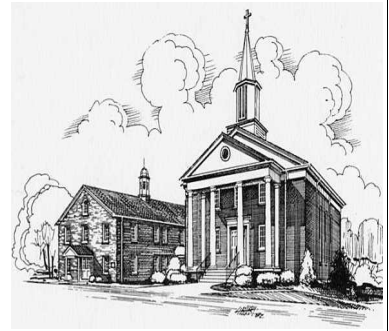


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday of Advent

Year B

RCL



2 Peter 3:8-15a Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 Mark 1:1-8

The Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 Page 708, 709, BCP

Benedixisti, Domine

1 You have been gracious to your land, O LORD, you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.

2 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out all their sins.

8 I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.

9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

10 Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

11 Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

12 The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase.

13 Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

**“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

SERMON

OK, it's Congregation Participation Sunday, a day in the church calendar that I just made up. The question for discussion this Sunday is this: what do you think about the world in which we live? What is its nature? Is it a good place? A bad place? A neutral place? It's not a trick question, and there are no right or wrong answers. I just want to know your notions of the nature of the world in which we live.

The second question is this: where do we get our notions of nature? I get to answer this one. We get our notions of nature from the stories we tell ourselves.

You're probably wondering what sort of stories I mean. Here's a story one ancient people told itself¹. In the beginning, the father god, Apsu, and the mother god, Tiamat, who was called "The Dragon of Chaos", gave birth to the other gods. They immediately regretted it because the younger gods made too much noise and they couldn't sleep, so they planned to kill their children. The younger gods uncovered the plot before the elder gods put it into action, and killed Apsu. His wife Tiamat, the Dragon of Chaos, was a much tougher nut, and she pledged revenge. The younger gods elected the youngest god, Marduk, to take her on. As his fee for success, Marduk demanded that he be made the supreme god, with power over all things. Marduk caught the Dragon of Chaos in a net, forced an evil wind down her throat, then shot her with an arrow which caused her to split asunder. He then spread her corpse out full length and fashioned the world from it. That's the story the Babylonians told themselves. Nature is a violent place. Violence and murder are the only tools which can successfully protect us from the forces of chaos. Even creation itself is begun with an act of matricide and violence is the tool with which we maintain order. For the Babylonians, their notions of nature informed them that the world is a very bad place indeed, formed of blood, death, and chaos.

Here's a story another ancient people told themselves, ironically also told from Baby-

1 *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian Creation myth, brutally edited.

lon, during a period of exile in that city and some scholars would say in reaction to the first story:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.²

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens ... then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.³

This ancient people saw creation as a positive act, not a homicide. The world started out as a garden, not a corpse. It is a pleasant sight, and God the Creator, the True Judge, proclaimed it as “good”. Violence, chaos and the first homicide only entered the story later, through the sin of two people. It is not intrinsic to creation.

It would be difficult to imagine two stories more different than these two. The Babylonian story sees violence as a tool to keep the forces of chaos from which the universe itself is created at bay. The Biblical story sees violence as a problem to be solved to return creation to its perfect state. It would be pleasant to imagine that the Babylonian story is of interest only to scholars, but that is not so. It is still with us today. If you saw the movie *Jaws* you will recall that the shark, representing chaos and death, was killed by forcing an evil wind down its throat (an oxygen tank), then shooting it so that it split

² Genesis 1:1-5

³ Genesis 2:4b-9

asunder. What? You thought those people in Hollywood thought this stuff up? They copy and paste, church. They copy and paste.

The very American story of maintenance of order through violence is Babylonian to its center. It forms the plot arc of most of our entertainments, right down to our sports. The news reported that the Cowboys “crushed” the Bears. They didn’t win. They didn’t prevail. They “crushed” the Bears. This is why being a Christian in America so difficult: A Christian is supposed to believe the other story – that violence begets violence and whatever the justification for using violence, we are repeating the sin of Cain, **and** we are to believe the Biblical story in the face of an entire country wedded to a Babylonian narrative.

So our notions of nature are informed by two radically different stories. In one, order is preserved only by superior violence against the chaos of a deadly world. In the other, creation itself is pleasant and its very Creator calls it good. Violence is a problem to be solved to return creation to its created state of “good”. We spend a lot of energy expressing our approval of this story, but we are not very good at living our lives in accordance with it. We have divided notions of the nature of things. On the one hand, we acknowledge that our lives are in God's hands. We are the clay. He is the potter. In matters religious, we're comfortable in committing ourselves to His care. In matters pragmatic, however, when we think of things like burglars and terrorists, then it's pretty much up to us to look after ourselves by whatever violent and murderous means we have to hand. We have a church notion of nature and a notion of real nature. They are not the same. We have divided notions of the nature of the world because we, ourselves, are of two natures. We try to look at the world through two, opposed, stories. Is it any reason we mess things up so often?

What would a life lived in full recognition of the Biblical story look like? I have an-

other story to answer that.

Martin Greenfield was a teenage prisoner at the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp, slowly starving to death, when he was forced to perform labor at the mayor's bombed out house in nearby Weimar.

Martin spotted a broken rabbit cage with some rotten lettuce inside. For him, such "food" would be an upgrade. As he reached for the wilted leaves, a female voice shouted, "Why in the hell are you stealing my rabbits' food?!"

It was the mayor's wife, standing nearby holding a baby. She called the Nazi guards over, and Martin was beaten badly.

Until that moment he had thought only of surviving the surreal horror which had already robbed him of his family and all that he knew - including his own mother and baby brother.

Now a new desire would drive him forward: he vowed to return and kill the woman who had treated him so cruelly.

He got his chance.

Liberated by the U.S. Army on April 11, 1945, Martin and two buddies immediately grabbed machine guns from the pile of confiscated arms outside the camp, and made their way to the mayor's house. They found the woman, again holding her baby.

Martin writes:

"Remember me?!" I yelled. "Do you?!"

Her blond tresses shook violently. She hid her face behind her upraised hand as if shielding herself from the sun.

"You had me beaten because of the rabbits. I'm here to shoot you!" I said, sounding like an SS.

"No! Please!" she quavered. "The baby, please!"

I aimed the machine gun at her chest. The baby wailed. My finger hovered above the trigger.

"Shoot her!" one of the boys said. "Shoot her!"

The woman's outstretched hand trembled in the air. My heart pounded against my chest like a hammer.

"Shoot her!" the other boy yelled. "That's what we came here for! Do

it!”

I froze. I couldn’t do it. I could not pull the trigger. That was the moment I became human again. All the old teachings came rushing back. I had been raised to believe that life was a precious gift from God, that women and children must be protected.

Had I pulled the trigger, I would have been like Mengele. He, too, had faced mothers holding babies — my mother holding my baby brother — and sentenced both to gruesome deaths. My moral upbringing would not allow me to become an honorary member of the SS.⁴

Death and violence is what we have brought to God’s Creation. In doing so, we have messed it up. Those of us who claim the name Christian are called to spend our time here in restoration, not in adding to the sum of violence. Peter wrote:

The Lord is not slow about his promise, ... but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God ...

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Can you do that, church? Can you involve your whole self in restoring the story the church exists to tell?

AMEN

⁴ Excerpt from a New York Post piece, from the Accidental Talmudist

BENEDICTION

In Ferguson, Missouri, we have looked into the raw, open sore of racial divide. A white policeman perceived a young black man as threatening to him, and he went for his gun for violence is the only reliable response to violence. A young black man perceived himself threatened by a white police officer and may well have attacked him. What do the two stories tell us?

The Babylonian story would say that the Dragon of Chaos must be forcibly subdued by superior force, perhaps by the use of surplus military equipment. The chaos of street protest must be ended before anything else may be done, and then the thing that must be done is to find those guilty of damaging property and deal with them through the courts.

The Biblical story tells us something different. The Biblical story instructs us that the work of God in creation made something good. We, the body of Christ in the world, are here to show the goodness of creation to those who are frightened and angry. That can only be done by confronting the issues which are being raised for Dr. King observed that, “A riot is the language of the unheard.” One of those issues is that the citizens of Ferguson do not trust their police department – they fear it. They see the superior force wielded by the police department as a threat to their very lives. Whatever happened the night Michael Brown died, it is up to the followers of the Biblical story to hear the voice of the unheard, and to address their complaints for only by doing so can we return creation to that which its Creator intended it to be.

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