

Sermon Archive 321

Sunday 6 December, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 40: 1-11
 Mark 1: 1-8

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Before the sermon proper, here's a wee excerpt from a thesis I wrote. It goes like this:

In “Pictures and Make-Believe”, Kendall Walton entertains the image of children playing a game of “pies” with globs of mud. The children play at baking the pies, putting raisins (pebbles) in the pies, noticing that some people have bigger pies than others. Walton notes that for the game to work, there must be some mud to play with (which, as a matter of *fact in the real world*, forms globs that are *actually* of different size, consistency, and location), and a shared decision amongst the children for globs of mud to be pies. Walton calls the shared decision part of the “rules of the game”. There can also be, in the game, various purely imaginary claims which are not related to any governing fact. Such imaginary claims might be along the lines of “Johnny once served a scrumptious pie to Napoleon,” where there is no Napoleon object within the context of the game. Walton notes that context is what makes various make-believe claims true(Make Believe) or false(Make Believe). (It might be true, for instance, within the context of the game, that Sally has a pie. Outside the context of the game, however, she does not have a pie; she has a glob of mud.) Walton also notes that the context of a game does not completely usurp conventions or displace beliefs from the broader context of the real world. While all of Walton’s children seem quite content to play the game, and to explore different activities within the world of pie-making, none of them deepens or develops the game by eating a pie. The making-believe involved in the game is an entertainment without belief. (Make believe is not deception; it is

entering a world with an awareness of the rules which govern truth, falsehood, and appropriate engagement with that world, without losing awareness of that world's relation to actuality.)

-ooOoo-

A long, long time ago, someone whose name probably was Isaiah, wondered how he might comfort the people around him. Having gone through a veritable wringer, they needed comforting: military defeat, exile from their home, a feeling like they'd become withered grass, and all the colour had gone out of their life - faded flowers. A feeling like they were stuck in the bottom of a deep, inescapable valley, and that within the valley every place was sharp and rough. Comfort these people! Comfort them.

Well, Isaiah doesn't initially know where to start. A voice says to him "cry out!" And he replies "what shall I cry?" He doesn't know.

He is given some words - words describing the arrival in the valley of a god. The god is lifting up the valleys, and smoothing down the places that are rough. The god is being gently shepherd-like, carrying the little and afraid ones in his arms. And Isaiah is told to share these words, this vision, with all the people - to lift up his voice and not be afraid. Speak tenderly, Isaiah, but not apologetically! Proclaim rescue to the comfort-needy people, Isaiah, and the glory of the god will be revealed!

Well, I don't know if Isaiah ever made a public noise. The words did get written down. They got put in a book which was highly respected by the pious ones. But beyond that, nothing much else happened. And of course, if you don't speak, and if you don't act, if you don't entertain a belief, who should be surprised by a harvest of nothing? In this case, nothing happened for a long, long time.

Many years later, while off to the side a group of children are making mud pies, someone called John is remembering the almost forgotten words of long ago. He's seeing himself in the words - they're beginning to shape who he thinks he is. He's to be a voice, crying in the wilderness. He's to reactivate the image of the valley being lifted up as

God enters the scene. Something resonates for John in the image of the forerunner, the announcer of the One who will come with comfort.

It's just a thought, really - a mental image. Not as real as the mud that children turn into pies. But the thought stays with him, the calling keeps calling. Doing nothing, saying nothing, begins to lose traction. A new world, with new rules, and new food, and new believing, and straightened roads and lifted valleys is playing a game with his brain.

Well, having remembered the forgotten word, having re-seen the faded vision, having let it play with his "make believe" (why shouldn't the world be different, and mud be pastry, and bread be body), *"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."*

Mark calls it: *"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."*

Matthew starts his story of the good news of Jesus Christ with a family tree, a list of names. Luke begins his with a series of quaint scenes and lots of angels - what a world is that! John begins his with a vast cosmic flourish. **Mark** begins his with an old vision remembered and a man getting on with it, as if the vision is true. A vision become a trigger for an action, which kicks off a train of events he calls "the good news of Jesus Christ".

I think we often become mired in the way the world is. We don't play. We don't dream. We fall into treating options as necessities. And it becomes for us a deep valley of sorts. **Children** can find life and joy when mud is pastry, and people have pies. They delight in remembering how Johnny served a scrumptious one to Napoleon. And they laugh and wonder and make-believe, and share the joy.

John, in some kind of child-like openness, begins to live as if God really is coming - with comfort and caring. For him it's not quite make-

believe. Not quite a suspension of disbelief - but more like saying "why not" to the vision. **Could** it be? It is the role of the gospel forerunner to do something make-believe towards the vision - and in doing so, rejoicing then when important things become real.

For a community like Knox, heading into Christmas, what is the vision? Well, the Christmas vision is that of a world where God is at home in a feeding trough because there's no room at the inn - people make do to accommodate God. It's a world where shepherds are sure they hear angels. It's a world the greeting is peace. It's a world where people go in droves to confess their sins and Holy Spirit is promised. It's a world where, eventually, the child in the manger becomes the risen One - risen with healing in his wings. Not quite as old as Isaiah's, but equally full of comfort for the people, **that's** the Christmas vision. Shall we write it down in a book, respect then forget it? Or will we make pies with it? Let it play with our imagination until it owns us, beguiles us into making believe, and propelling us into a new world of "why not"?

Were we to do that, I predict that somewhere along the way we'll bite on mud, and have to spit some of it out - realizing that mud is still mud, and some things we'd rather weren't still real **are** real. Hope will make us fools. And that was true for John the Baptist too. Although he had stepped fully into the beginning world of the gospel of Jesus, things conspired near the end of his life for him to ask the question "is Jesus the One? Or should I have looked for someone else?" Faith isn't simple making-believe; there's a genuine conversation with reality. Mud in the mouth is a step too foolish! But saying nothing, doing nothing, believing nothing, never playing with the mud, leads to a harvest of nothing.

Coming into Christmas, we are met by the forerunner. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me" he says. Inspiration; vision; hope; the good news of Jesus Christ - God with us. The risk of mud in the mouth. Do we care for a piece of pie?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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