

God's Righteousness

Mark 1:1-8

Understanding Christmas [Advent Series: Second of Four]

Last Sunday I began a four-proclamation series for Advent with the underlying theme of *Understanding Christmas*. And last Sunday I started by focusing on God's grandeur, getting in touch with the majesty and power of our God who created all things. I said that the "what" of Christmas is that God incarnated himself into the world as the Son, Jesus Christ. But then I said that the "why" of Christmas was to save us from our sins, that we are too frail to save ourselves, and thus we need a Redeemer.

Today I want to say to you that God is a righteous God and that his righteousness are reflected in what happened in that manger in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. Righteousness is one of God's primary characteristics and it is also one of his most overlooked characteristics.

William J. O'Malley in his book *Meeting the Living God* gives us some modern descriptions of God. See if you find your understanding of God among any of these:

- "God is there when I'm in need. Otherwise, when things are okay, he doesn't intrude in my life."
- "God is the Good Shepherd who pats my wooly head and makes everything right again."
- "God is the judge whose sole purpose is to condemn and forgive; I will not encounter him until I die and face the Day of Judgment."
- "God is infinitely distant and is holy perfection. He is the reason behind all things but he is too pure to muddy himself in my human life and concerns."
- "God is the pal at my elbow who goes along with anything I choose to do."

O'Malley naturally labels all these as "false gods." So, who is God? The Bible is very clear – God is a righteous God. We cannot appreciate the meaning of Christmas without that understanding. We cannot grasp the depth of the Cross if we do not understand that God does not turn away from our sins, but rather sent his Son to die for them. In other words, God is a righteous God!

But what does it really mean to say that God is righteous? The term "righteousness" applies to two aspects of the Divine character. First, it defines who God is, and second, it attests to how God acts in history. The righteous character of God sets the standard of what it is that God expects of each one of us. We are also to be righteous people. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that the gift of the Holy Spirit enables believers to be "made righteous." When we live as righteous people, then we too are defined in God's image, and we too have a positive role to play in history.

Let me say this in another way – righteous living is God's will for his world. God did not send the Babe of Bethlehem to humankind so we could have another holiday, another excuse for parties. The biblical writers believed in the ordered plan of God. God is constantly working out his purposes. History is not a random and disconnected series of events. It is a process directed by God. We are within that process and we can help or hinder it. God sent the baby Jesus to grow and change our world as part of his plan. The world can be changed only when we live the righteous life God calls us to live. Christmas represents that calling.

John the Baptist was part of God's plan. All Jews of John's day understood ritual washing and cleansing as an act of purification. Baptism, however, was used only when Gentiles, non-Jews, converted to Judaism. John was telling Jews that they had strayed so far away from God that they had become like unbelieving Gentiles, and needed to be baptized to return to the faith. John's call was for repentance.

Repentance means to go in the opposite direction. It follows confession, and confession is at least a two-stage, and sometimes a three-stage, process. First, one must confess to oneself, "I have sinned." Second, if applicable, one must confess to the person against whom the sin was committed. And third, we must confess to God. When we honestly and earnestly repent, promising God that we will go in the opposite direction, that we will do everything in our power to never commit that sin again, then we receive divine forgiveness, and we are put into a "righteous" relationship with God.

John the Baptist was effective because he told people what they knew in their hearts to be true – that they were sinners. And John offered them what they longed for in the depths of their beings – to be forgiven. But there was more to it than just water baptism. John's message was also effective because he pointed to someone beyond himself – the Christ Jesus. John's baptism would cleanse the body but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, which would cleanse a person's heart and life.

In a few minutes we will enter the mystery and grace of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It is where confession, repentance, and forgiveness are manifested within the sacredness of worship.

A story: an old man lived in the middle of a desolate and hopeless city. One day he walked out of his home, onto the street and yelled: "Love! Peace! Righteousness!" The next day he did it again, and then again the following day. He did it for several days, each time shouting, "Love! Peace! Righteousness!"

Finally, one day his neighbor had had enough, came out and accosted the old man. "Are you crazy? What do you think you're doing? Nobody is listening to your 'love, peace, and righteousness.' This city is full of hate and crime and hopelessness. There isn't love for neighbor and there certainly isn't any peace or righteousness to be found anywhere. Give it a rest and save your breath! Don't you know that you can't save the world?"

The old man looked at his neighbor and responded, "Maybe you're right. Maybe my yelling, 'love, peace, righteousness' won't change the world but one thing it will definitely do – it will keep the world from changing me!"

I personally and fervently believe that God's love, peace, and righteousness will indeed change the world. Christmas points to both God's grandeur and his righteousness. Christmas is also God's call to us to be righteous through his Son who was born in Bethlehem on that first Christmas. May it be so. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 4 December 2011
[Second Sunday of Advent]