

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, December 7, 2008

Face to Face: New Beginnings “Face to Face with Regeneration”

Mark 1:1-8

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While reading 1 Timothy 1:17, Jonathan Edwards, the great eighteenth century philosopher and preacher, was overcome with a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from anything he had ever experienced before.¹ What were those words in 1 Timothy 1:17? “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” Edwards was overwhelmed by the presence of God. “I thought with myself, how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God.”²

We, like Jonathan Edwards, yearn for happiness. That is how the Father created us. Glut the hunger of your soul with the grace and presence of God. He will never leave you hungry. God will make you happy.³ Be persuaded that you can be happier in giving than receiving;⁴ that the aim of all of Jesus’ commandments is that your joy might be full;⁵ and that the joy of the Father is your strength.⁶

Pursuing the highest good will always result in your greatest happiness in the end. “The desire to be happy is a proper motive for every good deed, and if you abandon the pursuit of your own joy, you cannot love man or please God.”⁷ Psalm 37:4 reads, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Advent is about new beginnings. Jesus Christ came into the world, fully God and fully man. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, came into the world to proclaim salvation for man in order to reconcile all things to

¹Jonathan Edwards, *Letters and Personal Writings*, edited by George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 792.

²Ibid.

³John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 51-52.

⁴Acts 20:35

⁵John 15:11

⁶Nehemiah 8:11

the Father. Jesus Christ will return again, ushering in the beginning of the new heaven and new earth. Advent is about new beginnings. Are you willing to ask the Father for what you need? Is it encouragement, love, friendship, employment, freedom from an addiction, healing, confidence, contentment, purpose or any number of other basic human needs? As a believer in Jesus Christ ask the Father for what you need. God will work on your behalf for your benefit. He will work out his will and good pleasure in your life. It makes the God happy to do so.

Mark makes it clear that he is writing an account of "the beginning of the gospel." Beginning can mean "a starting point." It can also mean "first things." Mark's intent is to chronicle the good news from its beginning in Jesus Christ and its significance as a matter of first things. The Father made you and me in and through Jesus Christ. Our starting point is in Jesus Christ.

Gospel means "good news." The "good news" is contained in the words and actions of Jesus Christ. The gospel contains Jesus' preaching, teaching, acts of mercy and healing. Are you willing to ask for the preaching, teaching and acts of mercy and healing of Jesus Christ to impact your life? Mark's desire is for the preaching, teaching and acts of mercy and healing of Jesus Christ to be the "starting point" in every human being's life. Prepare the way for Jesus Christ in your life by asking for the gospel.

Mark makes it clear that John the Baptist was no ordinary individual. John the Baptist was a "voice crying in the wilderness." One way of looking at this "voice in the wilderness" is to imagine selling ice in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Ice in the middle of the desert is not expected. John the Baptist, proclaimed a message of repentance and forgiveness. It was not expected. He stood at the point between the past promise and future fulfillment of redemptive history. In his role, John the Baptist was both accomplishment and anticipation of that history.

Mark makes it clear that like the prophets of old, John the Baptist asked for all people, regardless of standing, to repent. Repentance connoted much more than sorrow or remorse. It included the reorientation of one's total life. Baptism was both an acknowledgement of one's sin and one's desire to

⁷John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 45.

repent. It was also an acknowledgment of the Father's acceptance of that repentance. The ultimate goal of repentance was the forgiveness of sins and acceptance by God.

Prepare the way for Jesus Christ in your life. As Origen of Alexandria, the third century Christian and theologian writes, "The way of the Lord must be prepared within the heart. Prepare, therefore, in your hearts the way of the Lord, by a worthy manner of life so that the words of the Lord may enter in without hindrance."⁸

You should be saying right now, "Pastor, tell me a simple way to prepare the way for Jesus Christ in my life?" Let me be simple and succinct. Take your delight in the Father and ask him to make you happy. You too can be happy. Prepare your hearts for Jesus Christ. Believe that God is sovereign. Believe that the God's happiness is the delight he has in himself. Believe that the God does everything he does to preserve and display his glory. Believe that in this pursuit, the God's soul rejoices.⁹ God's pursuit of praise from us and our pursuit of pleasure in him are the same pursuit.¹⁰ This is the gospel.

Advent from the Latin, *Adventus*, means "coming." Advent commemorates the coming of Jesus Christ; the first time in Bethlehem and also his Second Coming as Judge at the Last Day. Prepare the way for Jesus Christ in your life. Take your delight in God. Be born again.

Wayne Grudem defines born again as "the scriptural term referring to God's work of regeneration by which he imparts new spiritual life to us."¹¹ Remember Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee who said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him. Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'¹² The Greek word means "again" or "from above." Unless Nicodemus was born again that is from above, he would not see God. Nicodemus responded immediately to Jesus. "How can

⁸Origen, *Homily 21* as found in M.F. Toal, translator and editor, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading and Meditation*. 4 volumes. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958).

⁹John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1986), 38.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 480.

¹²John 3:2-3

a man be born when he is old?"¹³ Sensing Nicodemus' urgency Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."¹⁴ This is the doctrine of regeneration. Only God could prepare Nicodemus' heart to believe in Jesus Christ.

Face to face with regeneration. What is regeneration? Regeneration is "a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us."¹⁵ Ezekiel prophesied of the necessity of being regenerated that is born again. "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances."¹⁶ Regeneration is a work of God in our lives that leads to a response to God's effectual calling with saving faith.

Do not forget Jonathan Edwards and his desire to enjoy God. Prepare the way for Jesus Christ in your life by taking your delight in God and asking him to make you happy. Advent is about new beginnings. Regeneration, being "born again", is a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. Face to face with Jesus. Come closer. Be changed. Let us pray!

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 07 December 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh
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¹³John 3:4

¹⁴John 3:5-6

¹⁵Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 492.

¹⁶Ezekiel 36:26-27