

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year B

December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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The beginning of the gospel—the Good News—of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

What an astonishing beginning to a story! We've heard the phrases so often they roll off our tongues, into our ears, without even the slightest notice.

The beginning of the gospel—the Good News—of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

This title, which is truly how this phrase functions, begs the question: if it's Good News, what's *good* about it?

Hardly a day goes by without some kinds of disparaging remarks about Christianity being printed in the editorial section of our *Duluth News Tribune*. It seems that, in the eyes of the general public, at least, Christianity is more *Bad News* than *Good*. Just the past week, National Public Radio broadcast a debate from the East Coast. In what is described as Oxford-style debating, the proposal was something like this: "In the history of the world, religion has done more harm than good." Two scholars represented one point of view and two the opposite. From what I heard in the car and over the noon hour at home, I thought the two arguing against the proposition, one a Jewish Rabbi and the other an Evangelical Christian, made a very good and convincing case that that world is a better place because of religion than without it. Nevertheless, that side *lost* the debate. The results are determined by two polls of the audience, the first taken before the debate begins and the second at the end. In the first poll, before the debate began, more than 50% agreed with the proposition that "In the history of the world, religion has done more harm than good." At the end of the debate, the percentage in agreement with the proposition was even higher. Despite the very good arguments made on behalf of the benefits of religion, even more people were convinced at the end that the world is worse off, not better, because of religion.

So what is the Good News if most of the world thinks the Good News is Bad News? What's good about it?

Furthermore, to complicate the matter even more, our gospel writer Mark insists that the Good News has to do with Jesus, and that Jesus is indeed the Christ—the Messiah, the Anointed One. And to complicate the matter even more, at least in the eyes of an already hostile world, the gospel writer insists that this Jesus is the Son of God. If the audience at the Oxford-style debate is representative of the population as a whole, and if that audience has already determined that religion has negative consequences for the world,

then that audience would be even more hostile to a religion that claimed exclusivity, that it is Jesus in whom “the hopes and fears of the years are met . . .” Indeed, one half of the debate team arguing for the benefits of religion—namely, the Jewish Rabbi—would deny Christian exclusivism.

My wife Lynn and I have been writing Christmas cards this past weekend. Over the years we collect various cards that go on sale after Christmas, so we have a hodge-podge of many different cards, not enough of any one kind to send to the entire list. I was working on a box of cards that depicted the magi from the East going to Bethlehem to worship the New Born King, with an appropriate verse from the gospel of Matthew. I started addressing an envelope to our former AFS student and his parents from Turkey. Lynn noticed what I was doing and said, “You can’t send that card with the magi worshipping Jesus to Muslims!” She was right, of course. While we take the mandate to preach Jesus seriously, we must be sensitive not to use our holiday greetings as a weapon or in some way to insinuate our superiority over those of other faiths. It’s no wonder that Christians are more and more opting for the more generic “Happy Holidays” or “Season’s Greetings” in the choice of greetings cards, rather than anything specifically Christian.

Just this week I learned about a website called beliefnet.com.¹ It is for people of all faiths, or of uncertain faith, or of no faith. It’s for people who might identify as “spiritual but not religious,” who have some deep spiritual yearnings but who have no religious affiliations. One of the options on beliefnet.com is “Find your faith.” If you’re not sure what you believe, you can click “Find your faith” and see a list of more faith traditions than I knew existed.

There’s more. If you don’t find a faith in that list that suits you, you can click on “Belief-O-Matic”: A personality quiz about your religious and spiritual beliefs.² I did that last night, and then I was presented with a series of questions, each of which had a multiple choice set of options. The questions are:

- 1: What is the number and nature of the deity (God, gods, higher power)?
- 2: Are there human incarnation(s) of God (or of gods/goddesses)?
- 3: What are the origins of the physical universe and life on earth?
- 4: What happens to humans after death?
5. Why is there terrible wrongdoing in the world?
6. Satan’s presence results in much suffering. Agree or disagree or does not apply.
7. Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Then there is a series of social and moral issues that invite comment, including the respondent’s ideas about the nature of God, the relative importance of the sacraments, doing good works, abortion, homosexuality, the relative roles of men and women, etc.

I say all of this because our culture is changing dramatically and rapidly with regard to religious beliefs. Not only is there great *indifference* to Jesus, there is much *hostility* towards Jesus and those who profess him. If we’re not experiencing this indifference or even this hostility in our own lives, then either our circle of relationships is fairly small and narrow, or else we are not very public about our Christianity.

Something at the bottom of the homepage of the beliefnet.com website caught my eye. The caption reads: “Jesus needs new PR.”

If the attitude of much of the world toward Christianity is indifferent, negative, or even hostile, then the caption is exactly right. “Jesus needs new PR.” Jesus needs Christians who represent the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The world has had enough Bad News from those professing to be religiously motivated, with words and actions that result in intolerance, division, and hostility.

John the baptizer came on the scene announcing the Good News of the coming of Jesus. He came in a manner, in word and in dress, reminiscent of the prophets. He came with a message that echoed the words of the prophet Isaiah, who announces in our First Lesson today, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God . . . prepare the way of the Lord.” John the baptizer was PR for Jesus, and the people responded: “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were coming out to him . . .”

“Jesus needs new PR.” Jesus needs a church—a people—who announce to the world the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus needs each of us to be like John the baptizer, pointing to Jesus, preparing the way of the Lord.

“Jesus needs new PR.”

Marcus Borg is one Christian scholar and writer who is taking the current culture seriously, a culture of multiple religions, a pluralism of religion, on the one hand, and, on the other, a culture of indifference, skepticism, and even hostility towards Christianity. In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Borg acknowledges our diverse culture, yet he makes a strong case for professing Jesus. He insists that Jesus is the heart of God, and that the heart of God is love.

“Jesus needs new PR.”

Let’s imagine that we are one of only two people in a debate who are advocating for a position that Jesus is indeed Good News for the world, and that the whole world is watching us, and they are going to make their decision to embrace or reject Jesus based on our testimony. The good news for us (and that’s good news with a small g and a small n) is that Jesus is the other person on our debate team, and all we have to do is point to him.

Thanks be to God!

¹<http://www.beliefnet.com>

²<http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Quizzes/BeliefOMatic.aspx> (accessed December 3, 2011).