

“Life in a Changing World”

Mark 1:4-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Ever hear of a paradigm shift? A paradigm is a way of looking at reality, of organizing what we think is true into a meaningful pattern. A paradigm shift is when that view of reality falls apart or becomes drastically altered.

An example of a huge paradigm shift would be what our country experienced in 2017. 2017 will be remembered as a clash between truth and lies and as a struggle between those of us particularly in Christ’s church striving for inclusion and multiculturalism and the resurgent forces of white supremacy.

On the positive side, it has brought people together in defense of vulnerable people around the principles of Matthew 25 – treating the hungry, thirsty, sick, stranger, and prisoner as we would treat Jesus himself.

On the negative side, overt white supremacists were as emboldened and brazen in their behavior as they have been in several decades. I couldn’t believe my eyes as I watched on T.V. white supremacists wielding torches and waving KKK and Nazi flags marching through the streets of Charlottesville, Va.; their faces exposed for all to see, chanting vile anti-Semitic slogans including, “Jews will not replace us!” and the Nazi phrase, “blood and soil.”

I could not believe my ears when a sister ELCA pastor told me the story of going to a 90 year olds’ birthday party in her rural parish and having four of her male parishioners tell her how disappointed they were that the KKK rally in Mansfield had been canceled. As KKK members, they were planning on participating. It was no doubt their attempt to intimidate their first woman pastor.

As a church and as followers of Christ, we always stand up against racism. Here at Divinity in recent years, we have welcomed the Word of God being preached by Pastor Steve and Pastor Christine and have learned from them and Bishop Allende that we should not be surprised by resurgent racism as it has always been there lying beneath the institutions of American life.

As I was watching what was happening in Charlottesville, I told Danette that it feels like we've gone back to the 1950's and 60's. We were experiencing a paradigm shift in which it was O.K. again to be overtly racist.

Which is why it's so important in 2018 to renew our commitment to building a society and world for everyone, who are all beloved children of God, with no exceptions.

John the Baptist found himself in a similar situation. People were being oppressed and were ready for a paradigm shift. There is little doubt that John was a powerful and charismatic figure. He is mentioned significantly in all four gospels. He is even mentioned in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. In fact, John the Baptist actually gets more print in Josephus than Jesus does. This is a clear indication of John's popular influence.

That notoriety became a problem for the early church. Well into the first century, even after Jesus' death, there were many who believed John was the Messiah. He certainly seemed to fit the paradigm many people held regarding the Messiah.

He was a mysterious person, living in the wilderness. He was an ascetic, shunning worldly ways and comforts. He was a prophet, with a powerful message of social justice and spiritual integrity. And he was baptizing and calling followers to repent and prepare for the coming reign of God.

Not only his appearance and message, but also his timing fed into an expected view of the Messiah. John's ministry took place at a time when there was great hope that the Messiah would soon appear. The people of Israel were oppressed under Roman rule. Even their king was a Roman puppet. The time was right for reform, and expectations were high that the Messiah would soon appear and make things right.

Into that volatile mix John appeared. His message of judgment and repentance resonated with a people anxious for relief. His announcement that the reign of God had drawn near, combined with his call for all people to be baptized in preparation of that reign, drew huge crowds. Given his charismatic presence and his numerical success, it is easy to see how John might have been regarded as the Messiah.

But John knew he was not the Messiah. He knew he had a role to play, but as just that — a player, not the main attraction. In words indicative of John's vivid preaching he said, "The one coming after me is mightier than me. I am not worthy to untie his sandals."

He said other things that ought to have made it clear that he was not presenting himself as the Messiah. When pressed about his baptism John said, "My baptism is just with water. The one who is coming after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit."

When asked directly if he was the Messiah, John replied in the strongest possible negative terms. "I am not the Messiah." In fact, no matter what sort of pigeonhole people tried to push John into, John refused to go. He tried as hard as he could to state clearly who he was, and who he was not.

In spite of this effort, however, John was not always heard. There were persistent rumors that he was the Messiah.

There were those who, even after the ministry of Jesus, continued to follow the teachings of John the Baptist.' Even to this day, there is a small sect in Iraq called the Mandeans who trace their history back to John the Baptist and who regard him as God's Chosen One.

Jesus' entry into history is without doubt the paradigm shift of all time. Just about everything ever believed about anything has undergone tremendous transformation in the light of Jesus. In fact, Jesus was so different from what anyone was expecting, that even John faltered in his belief. While in prison, John sent messengers to Jesus wanting to know if he really was the one everyone had been waiting for.'

John's ministry and message was an effort to prepare his audience for this powerful shift of perspective. His task was to "make straight the way of the Lord." In other words, to grab a modern phrase, John's role was to pave the way.

There were several parts to this preparation. Our gospel reading tells us that John's message was marked with an appeal to repent. This repentance was to be symbolized by baptism. Baptism, John said, is a sign of forgiveness of sins. Repentance and forgiveness create the possibility of community where the hungry have food and the weak have comfort.

Into this mix of repentance, forgiveness and baptism, John interjected an expectation of the coming reign of God. He linked this expectation to "the one who is coming after me." In every way, and with every word, John sought to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. In doing so, he has left for us a clear path to follow, and some clear warnings.

If we were paying attention, the journey through Advent was steadily moving us toward Christmas morning. We celebrated the arrival of the Messiah.

Have we latched onto some other Messiah, holding stubbornly to some other paradigm of spiritual reality? Do we trust in wealth, health, relationships, power or good standing in the community to make our lives rich and full?

Only Jesus is the fulfillment of life. Our attachment and commitment to other things or ideas means we miss the mark and are following an inferior or maybe even false reality.

Have we fully prepared ourselves to receive God's gift? Have we repented — that is, turned around and placed ourselves where we can see the truth as it exists in God's Son? If not, we won't know the difference between the truth of Christ and the lies of racism and bigotry. If we don't, we may find ourselves giving loyalty and allegiance where neither is due.

Have we experienced the release of forgiveness? God's stance toward us is not unrelenting judgment. God moves toward us in love. God seeks to restore our broken lives, to free us from false truth, to mend us from bad choices, and to forgive us for failure. God wants us free to serve and worship. We cannot do that shackled by guilt.

Have we entered fully into our baptism? Not just into the literal waters, but into the deeper meaning of baptism. Have we accepted baptism as our seal of acceptance into God's family? Do we understand our baptism as an outward pledge of commitment and fidelity to God as king? Do we know baptism as the experience that links us to our brothers and sisters in the faith?

What false impressions are we committed to? What is it that we have believed to be one thing when in fact it is really something else? John the Baptist made it so clear. He was

not and is not the light. He points to the light. He marks a path to get us to the light. But he is not the light. Jesus is the light of the world. Let us turn now in the direction of that light and see what great thing God will do in our world.

May the peace of God . . .

#250 – Blessed Be the God of Israel