"Peace"

Isaiah 40:1-9; Mark 1:1-8

The birth of Jesus – the arrival of a gift promised long before.

I hated diagramming sentences. Do students even still do that? I can remember the endlessly twisted vines of nouns and verbs, clauses and sub-clauses. Ugg…Nevertheless, I wish I had paid more attention to it—grammar matters. Vocabulary and grammar are the basic tools of communication. Grammar is the means by which we convey exactly what we mean.

Take verb tenses, for example. Variously, Paul writes that we "have been saved" (Eph. 2:8), "we are being saved" (1 Cor. 1:18), and "we shall be saved" (Rom. 5:9). So which is it? Is Paul just being sloppy with his grammar or even his thinking?

Few would be so bold as to refer to Paul as "sloppy" about anything. He was an intellectual powerhouse, and his writings, collected for us in the New Testament, are the inspired Word of God. He meant exactly what he said. So, as faithful readers of God's Word, we pay attention to the grammar, including the verb tenses. Every bit of it matters very much.

A moment of the past, present, and future

The Old Testament prophets spoke a word of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. The Christian proclamation is that this Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God's profound and humbling incarnation. It is as if they were saying "God will act!" – the future tense. The arrival of God's Messiah *will* change the world.

This week is focused on the present tense. The bursting upon the scene of a man named John, who preached a message of preparation and repentance, and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, a cleansing of their sins.

John is the prophet who announces that the Day of the Lord is fast approaching, and God's people must prepare themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet, Isaiah, had cried out: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' " And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent the world was across which John's words drifted. Too often, it came bursting forth, spilling blood even within the sacred walls of Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness, proclaiming the stirring words of Isaiah. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah, longing for God to do God's big thing.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus, pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who will reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

In essence, John was saying, "Wake up, dress in your best clothes, the big day has come."

John's message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. This Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, "the evidence of the presence of the future." Not only was the arrival of Christ a fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham, but Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God's wondrous future comes rushing to meet the present day.

Preparation

In God's kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God's kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God's kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and demonstrated to people what God's kingdom is truly like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God's kingdom is not just a promised future but also a present reality.

In Advent, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the anointed of God. John and Jesus both proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Jesus showed the Jews a new way of being the people of God so that they might truly be the light to the world. We have the same responsibility to be God's light, to do all we can to build a world in which God's will is done, to bring about the marriage of heaven and earth that we pray for each week. However, in our pursuit of this divine marriage, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God, is our "comforter" and "advocate" (John 14:26 & 15:26). The new day is a day of comfort, peace, and joy. May we see the reality of God's kingdom in the look of unbridled joy on children's faces, in our efforts and gifts that help and serve others, and in all the goodness of this life.