

"Ol' Man Mose" by Peter Bankson

12/08/2002 by Peter Bankson, at Goodwin House: Ol' Man Mose

Seekers Church at Goodwin House

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Ol' Man Mose

Scripture

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, the people from across the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, confessing their sins, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:1-8)

Reflection

First comes the messenger.

Here, at the beginning of his recounting of the Good News, the Apostle Mark gives us an important clue to the way Christ came into the world: first, there is a messenger.

Here is Jesus' cousin John, gathering crowds by the river, quoting familiar Scripture, pointing to the coming Christ. John must have been a memorable figure ... dressed in a camelhair cloak, living a hand-to-mouth existence in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness.

Can you remember someone like that from your past, someone who stood out from the crowd, someone whose practices set her or him apart, someone who reminded you of the ancient promise that forgiveness and new life were waiting on the other side of repentance? When I thought about this Scripture lesson this year, the first figure that came to mind for me as one who stood out from the crowd was "Ol' Man Mose."

In the years right after World War II, my family used to drive by his camping place on the bank of the Spokane River on when were our way to Grandma Brown's summer place on Newman Lake, in the Northeast corner of Washington State. He was tan and weathered, with a long, grey beard, always wearing the same pair of tattered tan shorts, no shirt and a green eyeshade. He

would be sitting on a stool in the shade of one of those huge black pines that stood guard on the bluff, near an old, but clean Ford truck.

As we drove past, I would be watching from the back seat of the car. Ol' Man Mose would look at me ... and wave a small wave, as if he was waving just to me ... and smile just a little smile.

I found him scary and ... intriguing. I wondered if he lived there ... outside ... alone. I wondered why he stayed there, so far out of town. He seemed to have everything he needed, there in his spare campground in the cool shade of a hot summer afternoon.

I wondered why he waved to me. Moreover, because I looked and because he waved, Ol' Man Mose found another place to live ... in a small, sunny room in my memory. We never stopped to visit. Whenever I talked about Ol' Man Mose my parents told me he was "crazy," and to forget about him. Therefore, I did not talk about him, but I did not forget. When this Gospel lesson comes our way, I cannot help thinking of this strong, self-reliant old man, living a simple life with dignity.

The image of Ol' Man Mose makes John the Baptizer come to life.

John was calling hungry people to repentance, announcing the coming of Christ, inviting them to a brand-new relationship with the living God. Is this memory of a bearded loner really a messenger for me? Moreover, if he is, to what might he be calling me?

As I sat with this in the midst of a busy week of holiday preparations, I began to see this Ol' Man Mose as a modern Moses, one of the forebears of John the Baptist, calling me to lift up my head from all the busyness, to savor this day as the gift from God that it is, to stop and give thanks for community, and friends, and family.

This image of a gentle man watching as we rushed by in a hurry to get to our vacation calls me to remember the good news. In the midst of my rush to fix the world, God calls us to faithful, repentant love through the one we are waiting for, John's cousin Jesus, who is the Christ. When I close my eyes, I can see so clearly his tiny wave, and the gentle smile, and I know that Christ is coming.

Can you remember someone from your past who stood out from the crowd, someone whose practices set her or him apart, someone who reminded you of the ancient promise that forgiveness and new life were waiting on the other side of repentance? I pray that those memories can be part of the joy of this time of waiting – again – for the birth of Christ among us.

First comes the messenger, and then comes the Good News. The Lord has done great things for us. Let us rejoice. Amen.