

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One need only read the first several chapters of Genesis, the first book of our Bible, to know that God created this world with a history. Ours is a world of time and change. When the creation story says God saw that everything he had made was “very good,” it means then that time and change are good (Genesis 1:31).

God intended creation to move from a good beginning to a future that would be even better than that beginning – but the Bible tells us that the first created human beings brought about a great change in that!

According to at least one scientific theory, our universe began with just lots of radiation and lots of elementary particles. There were no flowers, no babies taking first steps, no Grand Canyon, no Beethoven’s ninth symphony, and no space telescopes, but these have all come into being.

So history happens, and history is an odd and strange mixture of both good and bad things. I call it a “strange mixture” because sometimes the good things of history have a downside – and sometimes the bad things of history have something of a good side.

As an example, consider the “strange mixture” of changes in transportation in the last couple of centuries.

Trains, automobiles, and airplanes have all greatly improved the movement of people and goods, and this has clearly been a good thing, a true blessing for commerce and the economy, and even an amazing gain in the general welfare of all people.

“Downside?” – Sure, there is one: Look at all the fatalities; look at all the deaths that have been caused by train collisions and derailments, by automobile accidents, and by airplane crashes since these vehicles have become standard modes of transportation!

And for an example from the religious realm of life, we can go directly and straight to the heart of our faith! Even though we call it “Good Friday,” what happened to Jesus at the end of his earthly existence can only be described, for him personally, as a bad outcome: an agonizing, painful, torturous death on the cross!

For us, however, it was very much a good thing: his death on the cross was complete and full atonement for our sins. For all those who place their trust and faith in Jesus, the cross is redemptive and restorative: “we were reconciled to God through the death of His son” (Romans 5:10).

Taking seriously this downside of human history, the 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon wrote that history “is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.”

The events of recent centuries have given little reason to change that description. If a loving God created the world for some good purpose, creation seems to have gotten off track. Considering human violence and warfare, especially, we have good reason to speak of “the terror of history.”

And yet, in the midst of all of this, “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius,” God’s good news became part of world history (Luke 3:1). The good news – the gospel – is that God has become a participant in the world’s history of time and change in order to save us and the world with its history, to turn the course of history back toward God’s intended goal.

In that “fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius,” John the Baptist began to proclaim “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:1, 3). He did this to “prepare the way of the Lord,” to get things ready for God to become a participant in the world’s history (Luke 3:4).

And a few verses after our text, Jesus comes into the story, to be baptized and to begin his work.

Those names in our text – John, Tiberius, Herod and the others – are all historical figures, people who lived around 2,000 years ago in various territories around the Mediterranean. Yet the story of which they are a part has meaning for all times and all places.

One of them, an otherwise obscure Roman governor, has one of the best known of all names from the ancient world because Christians repeat in their creed that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” That happened at a point in real history, not as something in a once-upon-a-time story, or in some mythic realm beyond the world.

The story of Jesus that the gospels tell is part of the history that we all share. He is a historical figure. Things happened to him and his life changed.

We don’t know when Joseph died, but he never appears in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ adult life, so it’s likely that he passed away while Jesus was growing up. Jesus lost his earthly father and mourned for him.

Jesus grew up, and the time came for him to put away his toys. He left his unexciting but secure carpenter’s work in the backwoods town of Nazareth where nothing ever seemed to change very much. It was time for him to go and hear John, to be baptized, and to enter onto the stage of the world’s history.

Jesus didn’t do that to give us an escape from the world of time and change. By becoming human and sharing in our history, God has taken that history into the divine life and given it eternal value. Jesus came to heal our history.

He shows respect for the past, for the traditions of God’s people Israel, but he points toward the future, in a new direction.

He confronts the kinds of forces that have distorted history in the religious establishment of Caiaphas and Annas and the political powers of Herod and Pilate, a confrontation that leads to the cross.

And in his life, death, and resurrection, he reveals the true goal of history, the kind of total trust in God and obedience to God that his life represents. In his story, we are shown where history is going.

This isn't an invitation for us to try to turn history into our own project and make it work out in accord with our ideas or wishes. Usually we can't see, at any given point in history, how things fit into the divine purpose. God undoubtedly has a lot of surprises for us on the way to the future.

But we are given a glimpse of the final future God intends for us in the history of Jesus. Our calling as Christians and as members of the Christian church is not just to look beyond history to an eternity beyond the earth.

Our calling is very much like the task that John the Baptist had – to call the world's attention to the one who “suffered under Pontius Pilate” and to proclaim that the day will come when “all flesh shall see the salvation of God”! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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