

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS

Mark 1:1-14

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday after Christmas Day, December 31, 2017, at 11:00 a.m. at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

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 out 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. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 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.’

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven,

‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,

‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

I.

Let’s revisit for a few minutes the way three of the four gospel writers introduce us to the subject and focus of their writing, Jesus of Nazareth, whom they assert and we affirm is the Messiah, the Anointed One, Jesus Christ.

Matthew begins his gospel through the experience of *Joseph*, the earthly, adoptive father of Jesus:

*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*¹

Luke unfolds the birth of Christ through the experience of *Mary*, his mother:

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*²

And John begins his gospel in the highest reaches of the cosmos, not through the role Jesus' parents play, but through the role Christ himself plays as wisdom/logos/Word *with God at and before* creation.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*³

Matthew, Luke, and John, each writing thirty to sixty years after the death of Christ, have introduced us to him with words carefully chosen and beautifully written. Their words are compelling. They become a part of our consciousness – and our culture – from the time we hear them as a child through the ninth or tenth decade of our lives. Whether we are loosely familiar with Christianity or it is a central part of our lives, there is little in these words that is new to us, and in hearing them, it is rare not to be stopped, at least momentarily, our heads lifted, our hearts transported to a place beyond the geography and circumstances in which we hear them.

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Contrast such poetic beauty with the beginning of the gospel of Mark.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan....

...the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness...

...after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Mark's words are informative. They are important. But they are not particularly poetic or beautiful. Their matter-of-fact tone could be describing the proceedings of a city council or a roads and highways commission.

In addition, notice what Mark leaves out in his presentation of Jesus Christ:

- No story of conception or birth
- No heavenly angels
- No shepherds keeping watch over the field by night
- No wise men following a star.

Instead, a fully adult Jesus simply *shows up* to be baptized by John the Baptist, hears God confirm him as God's Son, is driven into the wilderness to face temptation, then begins preaching virtually the same message John had preached: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*"

¹ Matthew 1:20-21.

² Luke 2:6-7.

³ John 1:1.

Why would Mark begin his Gospel in such a prosaic way? Why would he not include the beautiful stories of Jesus' birth? Why does he begin with Jesus as an adult?

II.

There are a couple of academic theories on this which are interesting and worth noting.

One is based on the generally accepted assumption that Mark writes his gospel several decades before Matthew, Luke, and John. *Writing first, Mark focused on what made Jesus different than other itinerant religious teachers and healers who had been put to death, namely his triumph over evil in his death and resurrection.* Over time, as the church learned more about Jesus' teaching and miracles, his origins became more of interest to them, as in "Who was this person who taught us these things and was raised from the dead? Where did he come from? How did he get to be the way he was?" Thus, by the time Matthew, Luke, and John wrote, Jesus' origins had become a matter of interest; and they responded by including stories of his conception, birth, and in John's case, "pre-existence."

Another widely held belief is that Mark was writing during a time of intense persecution of Jews and Christians at the hands of the Roman ruler Nero, and during or right after *one of the lowest moments in Jewish history*: the destruction of Jerusalem and burning of the Temple, around the year 70 A.D., events comparable to Pearl Harbor or 9/11 for us. Thus, Mark had little time to pause for beauty. The word "immediately" appears in his gospel over and over, far more than in any other. The intensity of what Mark reports of Jesus' apocalyptic teaching in Chapter 13 reflects concerns of Mark and his hearers that the world would soon end. In this apocalyptic context, Mark turns to the adult Jesus as a heroic character who combats evil, who suffers at its hands, who dies fighting it, and yet who ultimately overcomes evil. Beautiful, well-crafted stories of Jesus' origin and birth are simply not on Mark's agenda. There is no time for artistry.

III.

Whether or not these theories explain why Mark shows no interest in the birth or childhood of Jesus, the *impact* of Mark's opening – especially when compared with the others – *can* be instructive for us. *Namely: Mark calls us to get to work, "immediately."* The kingdom of God is near. The business of life is at hand. It is time to repent, turn our attention to the kingdom Christ brings, commit ourselves to it, get to work on its behalf. This "get to work attitude" is instructive for us whether the times in which we live are ordinary or apocalyptic.

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Many years ago, the Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner pointed out how much Mark notices the little, ordinary things around Jesus or that Jesus says and does, things that Matthew, Luke, and John don't notice, or at least don't notice enough to write.⁴

- For example, in Mark, when Jesus naps in a boat, it's in the *stern* he does it, with a *pillow* under his head. The others don't say that.⁵
- And the grass was *green* when Jesus fed the five thousand on hardly enough to feed five, not dry grass, crackling and brown.⁶

⁴ Frederick Buechner, "Mark," in *Peculiar Treasures* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1979), available at <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2017/11/27/weekly-sermon-illustration-mark>.

⁵ Mark 4:38.

⁶ Mark 6:39.

- Jesus got up "*a great while before day*" to go pray by himself, not at nine, not after a hot breakfast.⁷
- He was sitting down "*opposite the treasury* when he saw [a widow] drop her two cents in the collection box."⁸
- Only Mark reports how the desperate father said, "*I believe. Help thou my unbelief*", and how Jesus found it belief enough to heal his sick boy by.⁹

Buechner concludes:

You can say they make no difference, such details as these, which the others skip, or you can say they make all the difference.

What this means for us is that part of "getting to work" for the kingdom of God is noticing the details: paying attention to *people* close by, knowing the *color* of their eyes, the *expression* on their face, the help they need in reaching the water fountain and lifting them up to it, pulling a chair out for them at a table, scooting it back when they are firm and solid in their seat. When times are ordinary, "getting to work" in the kingdom means being on the lookout for any beauty or need, It is noticing the details and responding.

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A year ago on Veterans Day my wife and I were in a small town in the wine country of Virginia to which we had traveled for a wedding I was conducting. We had a day to kill so we went in to a local diner for lunch, and when we entered its one room, all conversation stopped, all eyes upon us, as we were the only persons of unknown origin in the room.

This was the only place we had been where we had internet access, so as soon as we placed our order I began checking email. An email came from someone in the church that caught my attention and in which I became absorbed.

As I was reading it and crafting my response, I now remember that there was a man standing next to me at the table trying to talk to me, but I was so absorbed in what I was doing it didn't occur to me to look up.

Pretty soon I realized that Maggie was speaking to him and when he walked off and out the restaurant I noticed, even from behind, that he was a veteran, dripping in medals, trying to welcome us to the town to which he had probably returned after his service in Vietnam or Korea and to the diner he probably frequents every day.

I had ignored him. I had failed to notice his hospitality and return it. To a veteran. On Veterans Day.

When we left I asked the young woman behind the cash register if he was a regular. She said he was. I told her what I had done, or failed to do, gave her my card, asked her to apologize on my behalf the next time he came in. She said she would. I hope she did.

It is the little things we do – or fail to do – that matter. *The pillow under his head. The grass that is green. The widow sitting opposite the treasury.* These things of small matter matter in life. They matter *in* the Kingdom.

⁷ Mark 1:35.

⁸ Mark 12:41.

⁹ Mark 9:24.

They are matters *of* the Kingdom. Instead of angels and shepherds, wise men and stars, Mark lifts these little things before our eyes.

IV.

This “get to work” attitude also holds for Mark in times that are not ordinary, times in which the future is uncertain and fear – grounded or not – rules the day.

As I said in the introduction, Mark was likely writing when the capital city of his beloved land – Jerusalem – had been sacked and the Temple which had stood since its rebuilding during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah had been burned to the ground.

- When you read Tacitus, as I have not, you realize that the Christians for whom Mark wrote – and Mark himself – faced the threat of persecution so horrendous that to recite it in church would lie beyond the bounds of decency.¹⁰
- When you read Chapter 13 in Mark and what he depicts Jesus saying about the destruction of the Temple, about persecution, about the coming of the Son of Man, you realize how much Mark and Jesus believed that the days in which they lived were apocalyptic in nature. As Buechner writes:

At any moment of day or night a knock might come at the door, and from there to getting thrown to the lions or set fire to as living torches at one of Nero's evening entertainments took no time at all.

Mark's acocalypticism was rooted in his experience; it is perhaps one reason he didn't feel he had time to write warm and beautiful stores about the birth of Christ.

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To bring this home to us: It is an open question in our day as to whether or not the times in which we live qualify as apocalyptic.

- Is the fractiousness in our political climate such that we may never be the same again?
- Are the dangers to which people point – a nuclear North Korea or Iran, noticeable swings in weather and disasters, terrorism, virulent nationalism and racism – truly threats to our existence or not?
- Is our system of government, our way of life, the future of our children – in danger?

If times are apocalyptic and we act as if they are not, we are unwise. If times are ordinary and we act as if they are apocalyptic, we are destructive. It is nerve-wracking not to know.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1801-1803. She cites Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44).

But whether our times are apocalyptic or not, we are alive today, and presumably like Mark's readers and hearers, but perhaps unlike Mark himself, we have passed through beauty. We have beheld the birth of Christ. We have sung its carols, heard the instruments and voices of its anthems. We have lit candles, seen their light flicker in the faces of children, caught the whiff of smoke as we have extinguished them. We have left the sanctuary in the cold of night with the strange warmth of "Silent Night" on our lips, and under "wondrous star" we have "joined with the angels singing."¹¹

Even though Mark only introduces us to Jesus when Jesus is fully grown, because of Matthew, Luke, and John, we have welcomed Christ as infant, as Messiah, as child born to set us free. We have paused from the intensity of work and study and connected with friends we have not heard from in years. We have spent time with family members more special *to* us – and sometimes more challenging *for* us – than at any other time of the year, but who, we have been reminded once again, are still family, our family, and we theirs.

We may not have the wisdom to know if, like Mark's readers and hearers, we are in danger of hearing a knock at the door and seeing through the peephole not the candles of carolers but the torches of torturers, but in the birth of Christ, we believe the Kingdom of God has come near – nearer than it has ever been before, near enough to draw us into it and elicit a response.

We know that Mark is correct in reminding us
That the only choice worth making is
To welcome the kingdom *immediately*,
Grasp it as elusive as it is,
Get to work on its behalf,
Pay attention to its details,
And trust that what we do in its service matters
To the One in whose hands we, and our world, are held,
The One whose birth we celebrate
Even while Mark looks at his watch,
Waiting for the celebration to end
So he can call us back to work.

Amen.

¹¹ Joseph Mohr, "Silent Night, Holy Night," (1818).