

Sermon Series: The Advent of the Messiah
Sermon II: "The Christmas Story According to Mark"
Text: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
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The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark 1:1

Today we continue our sermon series on the distinctive ways that each of the four Gospel writers deals with the birth of the Messiah. Last week, we explored Matthew's version, his pull-no-punches, sometimes heartbreaking account of the conditions that surrounded Jesus' birth, before and after. We had to make do last Sunday with no shepherds abiding in the fields, no multitude of heavenly host, but at least we had one angel. At least mention was made of Mary and her baby. In Mark, we have none of that. Jesus bursts onto the scene as a fully grown man, and in short order, in this first chapter, he is baptized by John the Baptist and departs for the wilderness, where he will spend 40 days being tempted by Satan. No Nativity here.

In the mid-90's Rabbi Arnold Goodman and I led a group of Atlantans, members of our congregations, the Temple and Trinity, to the Holy Land. One afternoon our busload of pilgrims rolled into the Palestinian village of Bethlehem. We had to pass through a military checkpoint, and when we got there, soldiers with machine guns were standing on the nearby roofs. The Church of the Nativity is in the center of Bethlehem, in the center of a large courtyard which was teeming that day with tourists and hawkers of postcards. To get down to the place where tradition says that Jesus was born, you have to walk the length of the long, dark, stone-floored sanctuary. Then you have to bend over double in order to go down a narrow flight of stairs with a low ceiling above, into the claustrophobia-inducing cellar where the manger allegedly is to be found. I suggested that just being in Bethlehem might be enough. Let's buy a postcard and get back on the bus. I was out-voted, so we waited in line while other tourists broke in line and whapped us with their fanny packs and camera cases. May I add - this is a very vivid memory for me - that many tourists with whom we shared that cramped space had forgotten to apply their Ban that morning. It was a very unholy experience, and when we got to the alleged manger, which is nothing more than a hole in the marble floor, we - or at least I - was disappointed.

For a different set of reasons, Mark wanted to skip the whole thing, that is, the birth of Jesus. It is not that he was in any way put off by the Nativity; he simply wanted to get on with the story. He didn't have time for the pregnancy and then the baby in the manger. He didn't have time for the flight to Egypt; he needed to

get on with the story. He was writing somewhere around 70 or 75 in the Common Era, when Nero's persecution of Christians was followed by the first Jewish - Roman war, in which Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans. Times were tense. The future was uncertain. The price of oil - that is, olive oil - was skyrocketing. (1) The world as Mark's readers knew it - the entire world - was in turmoil. Does any of this sound in any way familiar to you?

Mark desperately wanted to encourage faithfulness in those first-century Christians who were facing uncertainty. He wanted to reach out to those who had heard the Christian story but had not yet committed to it. He wanted to get Jesus on the scene as quickly as possible, because Jesus was the chief actor in the drama of salvation, and there was no time to waste on angelic appearances or the lowing of cattle.

The Gospel of Mark has been called a passion story with a very long introduction. Mark focuses so intensely on the meaning of Jesus' death that Jesus' birth is not of concern in the Gospel. Jesus' entering human life and human society - that was Mark's main concern. Maybe he did not speak of the birth for one other reason: that the stories circulating about Jesus' birth simply hadn't reached him yet, so he had no information to impart. In any case, these were his first words right out of the box, breathless with excitement and importance - *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ son of God*. Imagine someone handing you a scroll with those words scribbled on it - *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the son of God*. (2) You know you're going to get a lot more than a birth announcement here. This is the greatest development in human history. God's own son, possessed of God's own power, made of the same substance as Almighty God, is coming to inaugurate the reign of God on earth. Before that reign can begin in its fullness though, three things have to be gotten out of the way. First, the way must be made clear for Jesus to come. Second, Jesus must be baptized. And third, he must be able not only to survive but to overcome the trials in the wilderness.

This morning, we will have time only to think about the one who makes the way for the Messiah, "the fierce, prophetic preacher of judgment and repentance" named John the Baptist. He has been called a herald, a preacher, a path-straightener. Whatever you say about him, God entrusted to John the news that reality itself was about to be up-ended. **He** was not going to up-end it, but by golly, he wanted no one to miss the One who was to come after him, the One in whom God pierces the envelope of human hopelessness. When he comes, *the valleys will be filled with righteousness and the mountains of injustice that have piled up for thousands of years are going to be brought low. No more injustice, no more rough places - they will be made smooth*. Salvation will invade our tired and defeated world. Let the Romans be alerted. Let the discouraged take heart. A turnaround of monumental proportions is on the horizon.

So here comes John. He was less a preacher than he was a shouter. He appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. When you listen to him, you realize that there is more to Christmas than singing carols and baking fruitcakes. This is big; this is really big.

What I like about John is that he respects the people who come from Jerusalem and from all around Judea to hear him. He believes that they can take it - this strong word he has to say. He wants them to know that they need to get things straightened out right away, lest they miss their salvation when it comes.

I saw a *New Yorker* cartoon the other day that someone sent me over the Internet. It had a pastor in the pulpit, leaning over and saying to his congregation, "I've stopped expecting you to make leaps of faith, but it would be nice to see a hop or two now and then." John wasn't interested in hops. He wanted a leap; he wanted dramatic change. He wanted repentance.

In Hebrew, the word means "to turn". In Greek it means "to change". As one wise has put it, no matter how much extra exertion you put into it, if you are running in the wrong direction, you'll never get to where you want to be. To repent is to turn around and face the right way. Here's a question for you though. Why should we make all this effort to change if the One who is going to change everything is coming? Does that not seem a little illogical? Maybe a housekeeping analogy will help. Let's say you've got company coming for Christmas. It's time to vacuum and to get the apple core out from under the sofa cushion. Yes the house will get messed up again - a house stays clean only when no one lives there - but you need to get ready for company. I do remember the mother of a grown son, of friends of ours, who had his first apartment when he went to graduate school in New York City. His parents went to see him for the first time, and they complimented him on how great and clean and neat his apartment looked. He beamed and thanked them very much, and then he said, "You know the trouble with it, Mom, is that I get it all cleaned up and then three or four weeks later, I have to do it all again."

Life is mess, and John knew it. All human relationships have their messy aspects, and certainly the world is in a mess, an astounding mess these days. Sometimes we need for John the Baptist to say, "I want to have a little talk with you out here in the wilderness." What is the wilderness? The wilderness is the place where you get real. You are presented with a set of stark alternatives. Nothing can be hidden in the wilderness.

Some of you may remember Al Franken's character on Saturday Night Live. Stuart Smalley was a therapist. His treatment was to have his clients look in the mirror and to repeat over and over again to themselves, "I'm good enough and smart enough and doggone it, people really like me!" (3)

John's message is "Look at yourself. There is room for improvement." If you're perfect, why in the world would you need a Savior in the first place?

In Advent, we bravely listen to this wild successor of the prophets of old, who is willing to tell us the truth, and to remind us that we do need to clean up our act a little bit, now that we've gotten word that God's own son is coming, is not only coming to visit us, but to stay with us forever. He is coming to create the possibility of a whole new you, and the whole new me, and a whole new world marked by peace rather than violence. Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God. He burst onto the scene steeped in the tradition of the Hebrews, armed with the power of God, filled with God's everlasting love, and covered up with Holy Spirit, so much Holy Spirit, there is enough to share with every single one of us and even more.

We support a ministry at Morningside called the Intown Community Assistance Program which helps people who are hungry and homeless, and people who are trying to avoid being homeless. We help with light bills and rent assistance. Often, I receive an envelope of prayer requests from our friends at Intown Community Assistance, which are then passed on to the Morningside Prayer Group. I love this prayer. It arrived on angel wings this Tuesday. *Please pray over all my life situations. God knows all about them. Thank you.* There is nothing to do to prepare for the coming of Christ, but to tell the truth about ourselves, to sing our carols, and keep hope in our hearts. I have one bit of practical advice: don't spend a cent on a plane ticket to go see the manger on the other side of the world. The tourists and the postcard peddlers will drive you crazy. According to Mark, our Gospel writer, there really is no need for a manger for Jesus to be born. It seems that any willing human heart can be the place for the Spirit of Christ to make a home and to transform us forever.

John the Baptist – he's a Christmas guy if there ever were one. Thanks be to God for him. Amen.

(1) Christopher R. Hutson, *Feasting on the Word*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p.44.

(2) *Ibid.*, p.45.

(3) As told by William H. Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, December, 2008, p. 42.