

North Main, 12.10.17

Advent2JohnPreparationNM121017

Title: *After John Came One. . .*

Texts: Mark 1:1-8. Scripture reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark is a sparse gospel, the shortest of the synoptics: Matthew has 1068 verses, Luke 1149, Mark only 661. (Most of Mark appears in Matthew and Luke.) Mark has no . . .

\$ divine conception (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80)

\$ angels visiting Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

\$ angelic dream for Joseph (Matthew 1:20-21)

\$ birth narrative (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:1-7)

\$ shepherds tending their flocks in fields nearby (Luke 2:8-20)

\$ wise men offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1-12)

\$ Herod's command to kill boy babies younger than two (Matthew 2:16)

\$ flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-18).

Mark doesn't outline the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-7). Joseph doesn't consider divorce (Matthew 1:19). Joseph and Mary are not engaged (Matthew 2 1:18). Zechariah and Elizabeth get no ink, nor is there a birth announcement of John the Baptist (Luke 1). There simply is no Christmas story in Mark. Instead, we get:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

In mark we have a deficit of "Christmas" information. Matthew and Luke expand on Mark, warming our Christmas hearts. But Mark presents us with a grumpy, rough, countrified crosspatch of a guy, who eats bugs dipped in honey, prepares the way for Jesus, son of God, Messiah. Strange.

But no less so than the beginning details Matthew and Luke. A young girl is engaged to a man likely in his twenties. But before they set up housekeeping, she becomes pregnant, not the conventional way, but through the power of the holy spirit, a miraculous conception. An angel reveals the pregnancy. This, of course does not set well with, Joseph, the groom. A virgin. Pregnant. Right! He will quietly divorce her. But an angel visits Joseph, too, in a dream, and assures him that what his bride, Mary, has told him is true. So he forgives her. Marries her.

In her ninth month, they travel to Bethlehem, from a backwater town called Nazareth, to pay taxes. Mary delivers the baby there, in a stable, no less. Angels again, appearing to shepherds, musty, crusty shepherds, who rush to the manger to see the baby. Sometime later, after reading the stars, some wise guys arrive with strange baby gifts. Joseph has another dream, including

another angel: King Herod wants to kill your infant son. Take Jesus and Mary. Move to Egypt. They do. Eventually Herod dies. The family returns to Nazareth and set up housekeeping.

That's our Christmas story. That's what we invite others to believe. We've become so accustomed to this story that we don't realize how unbelievable it sounds to some.

I worked with Jack Becker for fifteen years. He was kind of like John the Baptist: cranky, brusque, straightforward. He was a little crude, a lot profane. He wasn't given to long dissertations. He didn't readily suffer fools. He used five words where others used ten. Mostly he believed in what he could see, in what made sense. I liked him. We had good conversations. We agreed a little. Disagreed a lot. But we could always talk.

Jack accepted the American God of military, the American dream, manifest destiny. He effectively wrapped God in green camouflage fatigues, marching with an American flag held high. Jack believed in God. The idea of Jesus was more challenging.

Conversations, during the holidays, eventually got around to our family celebration of Christmas. What follows is heavily edited to remove R rated language: "You believe that angels told a virgin she was pregnant. By the holy spirit, no less, whatever that is. And told her dense husband the same thing. And they both believed it. And the baby was God's son.

"Oh, and let's not forget your angels who visit shepherds who then visit the baby. And a bunch of wise guys who gaze at stars, and make the visit too, by following a star. Finally, dense Joseph is visited by another angel who tells him to escape to Egypt, because some jealous king wants to kill the kid, because he's going to be king. That's what you believe?" When I admitted it was, Jack said something like, "You're out of your mind! You're as dense as Joseph"

Gospel means good news, which is adopted from a Greek word meaning evangelist or evangelism. The gospels bear witness to Jesus as the Christ of God. They are written to stir faith in Jesus. Mark was written about sixty-five years after Jesus, to tell people that the Kingdom of God had appeared in the person and work of Jesus.

In verse 1, Mark gets right to it: "The beginning of the good news about "Jesus Christ," the "Son of God." In one verse, Mark names Jesus and who he was. By verse four, Mark describes John's message (and ours): ". . . a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Even though the messenger is rough around the edges, his message is one of grace: forgiveness of sins. John was not the kind of guy you would take to Concord Mall. Nor would you invite him to Christmas dinner. Think of getting stuck in an elevator with him. Or in a car trip to Florida. Yet people flocked to hear his message. Something about John and his message attracted people.

What about you and me? During the hectic pace of the holidays, does our demeanor and message attract people and counter the craziness of a culture that is highly stressed and fearful?

I don't know whether Jack ever accepted my version of the Christmas story or not. But I was responsible for telling the story, carefully, kindly wherever and how ever I could. I wanted to do that. I tried to do that. I hope I did that.



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