

Marking Advent
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Mark 1:1-12

I bet most of you don't celebrate Christmas following the gospel of Mark.

It would be a quick and quiet celebration. Listen to the entire birth story from Mark's gospel.....
(silence)

Yep, that's it. You heard it. In its entirety
What does mark say about Jesus' birth?
Nothing.
Jesus' childhood?
Nothing.
Parents?
Nothing.

Often we focus so much on how Jesus was born, or where he was born, or who was there. If that was the most important part we would worship the infant Jesus all year long. The Christian sign would be an animal feedbox not an empty cross. Jesus would remain small, cute, swaddled with fuzzy animals...manageable.

But isn't that where we'd like to leave it sometimes? This cute baby Jesus is a lot easier to manage than the grown up man Jesus, the one bringing change and conflict and challenge. The one who says we have to give away our money and our grudges.

In some ways Mark's gospel gives us the truest, clearest picture of what Jesus is about.

Start cleaning it up folks-
Get your house in order-
Change is coming and hope, too-
Make the paths straight-

Ultimately, it is Jesus message that is important: his teachings, his parables, his demonstrated love, his pushing and pushing at the establishment until he was killed, and his message of resurrection after the grave.

Now this is not to say I do not like Christmas. I do. I love the season and the quietness of the Christmas Eve night and the candles and the beauty of the crèche scene.

But I am also aware of how very tempting it is to see that as the ultimate meaning of Christmas, that quiet peaceful moment, rather than one moment before plunging into the raw and dirty world that we live in, the world that Jesus moved in.

A grandmother and her granddaughter were driving around town looking at all the Christmas lights and decorations. They passed one church that had a live nativity scene. The girl was delighted and talked with her grandmother all the way home about what she had seen and asked more and more questions, what happened next and what happened next. The grandmother ended up telling her granddaughter the whole story of Jesus' life and ministry and then said that he had been killed for his beliefs and his work to change the world.

The granddaughter stopped her and said, “wait, Grandma. Wait. They killed that baby? They can’t have killed that baby!”

Yes, they killed that baby ---much later once he had become a man and, following John’s lead, proclaimed change and radical reorientation of our lives and priorities.

They killed John too. He challenged Herod one to many times, embarrassing him and his wife for their inter-family assassinations and their corrupt leadership. The story does not end well with John beheaded and Jesus not long after ending up on a cross.

That is the message we get from Mark’s gospel which starts today with John, a wild and improbable figure out in the wilderness preaching repentance and offering baptism.

We often think of baptism as a Christian ritual or sacrament. But baptism has a long tradition within the Jewish faith up until the present. There were many points in a devout Jew’s life when he or she would become unclean, either physically like from touching a dead body or internally, like wrongfully accusing a neighbor of a crime. A baptism or mikvah in Hebrew was a way to address that impurity and become clean again. Mikvah would always occur in “living” water like a pond, or stream or river. Even today modern Orthodox churches have indoor pools where the water continuously circulates and is often fed by collected rainwater.

So John is at the river offering people a baptism for repentance of sins. And people flock to him for he offers an opportunity, a chance for change.

Now one very important distinction between this kind of baptism and the baptism done in many churches is that John’s baptism, the Jewish idea of baptism, was not about restoring a person’s relationship to God. One had to do that through one’s acts, deeds, prayer, and life. Unlike some Christian communities that offer baptism as a way to get back to God, to salvation, to avoid hell, to fix what is broken within us that only baptism can fix, this was not a baptism of salvation.

That is not what John’s baptizing actions or Jesus’ baptism was about. One did not get baptized to get back in God’s good graces but participated in baptism as an outward and visible sign of a change of heart, a change of direction or public declaration of seeking cleanliness.

So the people flocking to John were saying, “I want to change my life. I want to lay down my old practices, to repent and turn back to God. I want to participate in preparing the way for the long awaited Messiah who John said was ever growing near.”

Now they didn’t want to prepare themselves for the messiah so that when Jesus shows up he would say “oh look at all these nice clean salvation minded people. Wonderful.”

No, the people were saying by their baptism, I am prepared for the messiah so I can set my sights and follow in his ways.

A mikvah these days is often done before devout Jews celebrate major events, for instance the night before a wedding. A body is also ritually washed before burial. A mikvah is a preparation, not an end unto itself. John’s baptism of these folks was not an end unto itself but a preparation, a turning, a change of direction.

Is that how we see our Christmas scene? Probably not.

That is why Mark skips all that, or more likely, Mark didn't bother, and, as the first gospel written, it was only later the Matthew and Luke embroidered on the story. The gospel of John also doesn't bother with a birth narrative.

Mark moves right in to the meat of the meaning of Jesus' arrival. Radical transformation.

Now Mark also relates that John says repeatedly, "I am not the one. The One is coming and I'm not worthy of him." This is interesting. I often picture John the Baptist as the pointer man which is how he is depicted in much of classical art. Pointer man.

A colleague wrote, "I can't help feeling that John the Baptist has become a victim of Jesus' spin doctors. All four gospels make the point that John was not the promised Messiah. In various ways, they quote John himself to disabuse people of that notion. Why bother?"

I suspect it was because John originally had more followers than Jesus did. After all, when Paul got to Ephesus (Acts 19) he found that John's missionaries had already been there. The new Christian church didn't want just to convert Jews; it wanted to gather in Jews who had already converted to John's banner. The Mandeans, a sect in Iraq, still claim to be followers of John the Baptist. (midrash.org list serv)

Mark and the other gospel writers need to clear this up and so John's words declaiming the spotlight are highlighted.

But John's message of repentance comes across loud and clear, a message that Jesus takes up as well and sends rippling across this part of the Roman Empire.

I wonder how your manger scenes at home would look with a very large John the Baptist holding up a repent sign...or even better, maybe we should work a part into the Christmas pageant...

The point is that the Jesus we celebrate in the Advent season into Christmas is a snapshot. And he grows up. And we have to be careful not to box Jesus up into storage and leave him there after Christmas has passed and we dust him off the following year.

Jesus' coming was an act of salvation. Not in the narrow way of dying for our sins and letting us sit back and do nothing. No, Jesus' brought saving ways, saving words, saving actions into the lives of people he moved among, and those words, ways, and actions are salvific for us too.

Mark is very clear quoting Isaiah, "prepare the way." Jesus is coming and he needs a road crew.

Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem, broken and worn, withering and fearful. Prepare the way. God will come to you tenderly, holding you, comforting you, letting you cry on God's chest, but ultimately leading you...yes, leading you as God would lead mother sheep.

Jesus is a movement not a moment.

I want to tell you a story about a woman named Marilyn Mock. She's 50 years old and owns a modest rock yard business. She went to visit her son who was buying a house at a foreclosure auction.

While he was signing the papers she wandered back to the auction area and sat down on the floor next to a woman named Tracey Orr. Being friendly, Marilyn asked if Tracey was bidding on a house.

No answer.

She asked again.

Tracey started crying

Then she opened the brochure and pointed. That is my house, she told Marilyn.

The truth was, that had been her house. She paid \$80,000 for it four years ago. Then, like a lot of Americans she lost her job and wasn't able to keep up with the payments. Eventually the bank foreclosed.

Tracey, who is a housecleaner, had come to the auction to say goodbye to the house.

The house came up on the auction block, and before she knew what she was doing Marilyn started bidding. And kept bidding. And at \$30,000 it was hers. She turned to the sobbing Tracey and said, I did it for you.

The two women have since worked out a deal. Marilyn took out a loan against her dump truck to buy the house. And Tracey is paying her back with payments each month. Meanwhile, she gets to live in her house again. (Mitch Albom)

Marilyn prepared the way.

Christmas is not a moment calling us to one charitable act that is over and done with. Christmas is a relationship. Jesus is a movement. A calling to repentance and following a new way.

So my friends, prepare the way for not only the precious baby Jesus but for the man, the messiah, the healer, teacher, prophet Jesus who asks of us all we can give but who gives us all that we need in the process of bringing about the kingdom of God.

Before there was ever Nike, there was Mark saying Just do it.

Do you have grudges you drag out at every holiday gathering, It's time to repent and forgive.

Do you have trouble reconciling the rampant commercialism tugging at your sleeve with the call of the prophet tugging at your heart. It's time to repent and find true giving.

Do you wish we had more income equality, more fair tax law,, It's time to repent and speak up, speak out, write and advocate.

Do you have a hard time viewing someone from another political party with compassion and hearing their words. It's time to repent, to actually listen to what they are saying and try to understand.

Do you want to be clean from things that you have done or wish you had done long ago and buried? It's time to repent, to confess and make amends and start anew.

To prepare the way in all of us so that we can get to work as Jesus is again, and eternally, being born in our midst.

Thank you Mark, for giving us the straight up story.

Amen.