

## **Our Gifts. Our Stories: Prepare the Way**

### **Mark 1:1-8**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

December 3, 2023

I have always loved mystery books. As an English major, I always feel a little bit guilty about that, but honestly, a good mystery, a crackling fire, and a warm cup of tea at my side is one of life's simple pleasures for me. When I was a little kid, my favorite mystery series was Encyclopedia Brown and then, naturally, I devoured all of the Nancy Drew books. As I grew older, I got into Agatha Christie and became a fan of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. And then there was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with the great Sherlock Holmes. More recently, I've discovered the books of Louise Penney, and right now I'm like a kid at Christmas Time as I await the release of her next Inspector Gamache mystery.

I think part of what I enjoy is how a well-crafted mystery is like a jigsaw puzzle. You have all these pieces - some with very clear patterns or pictures and others with images that are completely unrecognizable - and somehow you have to fit them together within a frame. In the case of mysteries, the frame is composed of the characteristics of the genre. You've got to have a carefully developed and intriguing plot with unexpected twists and turns and plenty of quirky characters to carry the plot forward. I love to see how an author portrays each of the suspects - who are usually also the witnesses - their mannerisms, their eccentricities, and how they relate to each other - and then matches them against the wit of the detective.

As the detective interviews one after another, they are inevitably left with one truth that no one can deny. No matter how many witnesses there are, each will tell a slightly different story.

It's the very nature of who we are. We are hard pressed to tell any story completely objectively because we each have our own interests at heart. We will emphasize certain details and ignore others, change our wording to appeal to our listeners, reach a conclusion that just happens to support what we care most about.

The same is true of the four gospel writers. Each of them has his own agenda, a message he wants to convey, an audience he wants to influence. And so, while all of the gospels tell the story of Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection, each of the four gospels has its own flavor and characteristics which are seen in how they tell the story of Advent.

This weekend is the beginning of Advent - the season in which we prepare for the coming of Jesus. While in the secular world a new year begins on January 1, on the church calendar, the first weekend in Advent is the start of a new year. We begin the cycle of seasons anew with this season of waiting and anticipation. Advent is a time for joy and also quiet contemplation, for listening to the stories of scripture and opening our hearts to all the possibilities of how God might be at work in our lives.

This Advent season we'll be focusing on storytelling. Stories, whether scripture or legends, shared memories or picture books for children, add richness to our lives. They make us laugh and delight us and often tap into some deeper wisdom that touches our hearts and inspires us. Stories connect us to each other because they name our common experiences and emotions.

They serve to reveal a truth we may not otherwise know and open a door to vulnerability and authenticity which allows for deeper connection from heart to heart and soul to soul.

In our sermons each week in Advent, we will look at a different one of the gospels and explore how and why each gospel writer tells the events that lead to Jesus's birth. We begin today with the gospel of Mark.

What's important to remember about Mark's gospel is that it is thought to be the first gospel written. By the time he was writing, 70 years or so had passed since Jesus's death. The fledgling churches started by the apostles in those 70 years learned about Jesus through oral tradition and sermons, but there was no written account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Mark's primary objective was to gather the oral stories told about Jesus, put them into writing in some sort of logical order, and make the case that Jesus was the Messiah.

Mark's is also the shortest gospel, and there is a sense of urgency in the writing. The Greek word for "immediately" appears forty-one times in the Gospel of Mark. Mark wants people to understand that they need to recognize Jesus as the Messiah immediately for the sake of their own salvation and do it now. There is no time for the extraneous details about virgins and angels and shepherds found in Luke or the metaphysical conception of Jesus that John starts with in his gospel.

Which leads to one of the most interesting things about Mark's gospel. He writes nothing about Jesus's birth or childhood. As we heard in our scripture reading, he opens his story with John the Baptist quoting the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Malachi. Isaiah foretold the coming of a Messiah who would save God's people. Malachi, whose book is the last in the Old Testament, foretold that a prophet would come to prepare the way for the Messiah. By quoting them, Mark ties the story he is about to tell to the Jewish expectation that a Messiah would come.

John the Baptist, with his camel hair and locusts, is the one Malachi spoke of. He arrives to prepare the way, to announce that the people need to get ready, repent and be baptized. From there, Mark jumps straight to the beginning of Jesus's ministry with his baptism and time in the wilderness.

As a writer, Mark's real interest is in answering the question of who Jesus is. He has good news to tell - Jesus is the Messiah! Not only is Jesus the Messiah, but this Messiah is a very different person than they had expected. We see that in how Jesus lived and, more importantly to Mark, how he died. He is not a military leader who has come to lead a battle to overthrow the Romans. He is not a ruler who desires power and wealth. Rather, he is a healer and a miracle worker who seeks to care for God's people and lead them into a way of life which starts with love.

But also, Jesus is God's servant who will suffer persecution and an unimaginably painful death for the sake of our salvation. In other words, in typical fashion, Mark gets straight to the point. There's no time to lose.

So, what can we learn from Mark's entrance into the Jesus story? For one thing, you can be a Christian, a Christ-follower, without accepting the virgin birth. Mark clearly doesn't feel

that how Jesus was conceived or who his parents were is the point. The point is what he came to teach us and to do for us.

But his need for his speed, his emphasis on getting the story out succinctly and quickly means that his gospel lacks some of the beauty and elegance found in the other three gospels. Which may lead us to ask as we journey through Advent, “What are we missing for the sake of getting everything done on our to-do lists? What are we rushing by as we make our way from party to concert to the shopping mall?”

Advent is meant to be a season of waiting. Yet, sometimes in all the craziness, we forget what it is we are waiting for. We forget that Jesus is coming, a light to guide us through darkness and offer us hope. A healer who seeks that each of our broken hearts is mended. An advocate for justice who lifts the lowly and praises those most often pushed to the margins. And a savior who offers us salvation from all of the human faults that stand between us and wholeness, us and a right relationship with God.

So, I invite you in this season to appreciate Mark’s urgency and efficiency, but perhaps consider a slower, more contemplative journey toward Jesus. Take a walk in the snow. Spend time with your loved ones. Worship and sing. Name your hurts and hand them to God. Ask forgiveness. Take time for prayer. Breathe deeply when you begin to feel stressed. Remember Christmases past. Tell a favorite story. Take time to prepare the way for the Lord not just in decorations and gift shopping, but within your heart, as well.

May it be so. Amen.