

Celebrating Christmas at Mark's House
Mark 1:9-15
First Presbyterian Church
December 1, 2019

Introduction to the Sermon Series

Growing up in Atlanta

with both sets of grandparents in town,
Christmas day always meant time spent in three houses.

First, at my grandparents on my Dad's side.

My Nana loved Christmas and loved to decorate...
and let's just say she spared no expense.

Outside, wreaths hung in every window
and on the front door.

Inside, a huge artificial tree stood floor to ceiling
with almost every square inch
covered with some light or ornament, tinsel or bow.

The presents cascaded out from under the tree...
sweet rolls and cider and candy
were available in abundance.

I think back on those Christmas mornings now
and the phrase that comes to mind is "over the top."
Not that I am complaining, mind you.

The second house was my grandparents on my Mom's side.
They were, I guess you could say, more simple people.

Their home was much smaller, just two bedrooms.

Their tree was much smaller...
nicely decorated, but in no way showy...
and always covered with those silvery icicles.

There was a simple wreath on the front door
and some garland strung on the living room mantle,
but not much more.

And there were fewer presents to open...
but always a wonderful meal.

Christmas there was as much about being together around the table
as it was ripping through wrapping paper
to see what was underneath.

And finally, the third house was our own.
Outside there were wreaths in the front windows.

Three-foot high, lighted plastic candles
stood on either side of the front steps...
a spotlight was stuck in the yard
to cast its light on the front door garland and wreath.

Inside we always had a fresh tree –

as fresh as you can get in Atlanta.
A white ceramic nativity scene
was nestled in the fresh garland on the mantle.
The den smelled like a pine forest.
My Dad always made us wait for presents
until the coffee was made
and he could get a fire going in the hearth...
which always took FOREVER!

Three houses...
three ways of seeing and celebrating Christmas.
No doubt you have similar experiences –
visiting relatives and friends
and going to open houses–
you spend time in other people's homes
and get to see how they celebrate...
how they decorate...
the kinds of things they cherish.

Beginning today and continuing throughout Advent,
Heather and I will lead you on a tour of homes, so to speak –
Gospel homes to be specific –
to experience how Christmas is celebrated by each.
We begin by going to visit Cousin Mark.

Bible Reading

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.
¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved;* with you I am well pleased.'
12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.
14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news* of God,*
¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;* repent, and believe in the good news.'*

Prayer for Illumination

Guide us, O God,
by your Word and Spirit,
that in your light we may see light,
in your truth find freedom,
and in your will discover your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

A regular part of most any pilgrimage to the Holy Land
is the Palestinian city of Bethlehem.
To get there you have to pass through a military checkpoint
at an opening in a large wall
that is guarded by soldiers with automatic weapons.
I will never forget my first visit
to the famous Church of the Nativity
in the center of Bethlehem.
To get down to the place where tradition says that Jesus was born,
you have to walk the length of the long, dark sanctuary.
Then you have to bend over almost in half
to go down a narrow flight of stairs
to make it to the claustrophobia-inducing cellar
where the manger allegedly is to be found.
There you wait while other tourists break in line
and whap you with their fanny packs and camera cases...
I might add that in such a cramped space
you come to know quickly which of your fellow tourists
applied deodorant that morning.

It was not exactly a holy experience,
and when I finally got to the alleged manger –
which was nothing more than a hole in the marble floor,
I was very disappointed.
This is why we skipped the Church of the Nativity
on our trip this past September.

Well, it was for a very different set of reasons,
that the gospel writer, Mark,
decided to skip the whole birth of Jesus.
Which means that when you visit Mark's house this time of year,
you won't find anything "Christmasy" going on in there.¹
In fact, MARK may need YOU to tell HIM the Christmas story...
because he never speaks of Jesus as a baby
or mentions anything about a special birth.
He has no wreath on the door...
no Advent candles on the breakfast room table...
no Christmas tree in the den...
no garland on the mantle.
No, when you are at Mark's house,

¹ Cynthia M. Campbell, Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes (WJK,2019) p. 1

there is absolutely no way to know that it's Christmas,
unless you happen to notice who is there.²
Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation –
the good news that God chose to “put skin on” –
to take on human flesh and live among us.
And Mark may not tell us how Jesus was born –
(like I said, he may not know)
but he does know the good news
that Jesus is the love of God come down to people.
And if you happen to stop by his small and simple house this year,
he will tell you just how he knows that.
He will tell you how Jesus,
like lots of other folks in Judea,
how Jesus went out to find John the Baptist –
that fire-breathing, locust-eating, repentance preacher.

Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River...
and as he comes up out of the water,
the Spirit of God falls on him
and he hears God's voice,
"You are my son, whom I love
and with whom I am well pleased."
It is a sweet moment, but it doesn't last long...
because immediately the Spirit
casts Jesus out into the wilderness to be tested.

Now, what you need to remember
is that in the Bible the wilderness isn't just a zip code...
a place on a map.
It's a spiritual condition... a life condition.
Wilderness is anywhere that God's people are tested...
are pushed to their limits.
The wilderness is anywhere
it's where God's way will sometimes seem foolish
and other voices will often seem reasonable...
and we have to decide if God can really be trusted.
The wilderness is anywhere faith must be chosen –
again and again and again.
Because in the wilderness we battle to stand strong
when surrounded by forces
that would make us afraid... feel small...

² Thomas Are, Jr, “Celebrating Christmas with Mark,” Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS., December 2, 2018. Find at Day1.org.

or maybe even forget that God cares about us.³
You know the wilderness... I know you do.
And I do, too.
Because in this life the wilderness is never far away.

Matthew's Christmas begins in **Nazareth** (that's next week)...
Luke's Christmas begins in **Jerusalem** (that's the week after)...
John's Christmas begins **before**
either Nazareth or Jerusalem existed
(that's the Sunday before Christmas).

Mark's Christmas begins in the **wilderness**.
And the truth is Jesus never gets out of that wilderness.
From the beginning to the end of Mark's gospel,
Jesus is in the battle.
He battles demons and storms.
He stands up to social and economic structures
that oppress those who are poor.
He resists religious powers
that twist God's will to their benefit.
From his first moment until his last, he is in the battle –
and he does not stop fighting
until he breathes his last on that Roman cross...
his blood spilling on wilderness ground.
And if I understand this gospel at all,
I think what is telling you
is that you can know that the love of God has taken on flesh,
because that love will find you even in the wilderness.

So, Mark's home can be found most anywhere.
He lives in the suburbs with manicured lawns
and what looks like the perfect life, but really is not.
He lives in the dilapidated rental with locks on the doors
and the neighbor's TV playing too loud
for the kids to sleep on school nights.
He lives in a dorm –
the place of all-nighters and those lonely times
trying to decide who you are going to be
and what you are going to do with your life.
He lives in the nursing home
where the pictures of the grandchildren fill the shelf,
but loneliness fills the air.
He is in hospital rooms and jail cells –

³ Are, again.

where the nights are endless
and the morning comes too often
with no promise of a new day.
Mark may not know where Jesus was born
(or under what circumstances),
but he does know where the son of God lives –
in the wilderness...
because that's where we are.

So, here's what I hope.

I hope you can bypass Mark's house altogether this Christmas.
That's right...

I hope your life is full of peace and joy
and that those whom you love are well.
I hope that this Christmas the worst thing in your life
is that you overcook the ham or forget to buy the eggnog.
But it's not that way for many folks...
and maybe not for you.

Christmas can be hard.

It's supposed to be so warm and wonderful...
so joyful, so stitched together with love.
But sometimes that "supposed to be" just magnifies
our hunger, our grief, our fear, our longing.
I am thinking of those of you who are painfully aware
of the empty place at the table this year.
I am thinking of those of you who got a phone call
that someone you love is in trouble
and you don't know how to help.

I am thinking of those of you
who have all the EXTERNALS lined up in perfect order –
family, career, accomplishments, investments –
and yet, there is a hole in your soul
and you feel absolutely lost.

I'm thinking of those of you
who look at the world the way it is
and all you can do is mourn and pray
because it breaks your heart.

I'm thinking of you and want you to know
you are invited to Mark's house this year -
where the only sign that Christmas ever happened –
the only sign that there was an angel named Gabriel
that visited a couple named Mary and Joseph
who had a baby they laid in a manger...
while a heavenly host appeared to shepherds in the fields...

and magi came from the East bringing three gifts...
at Mark's house the only sign this Christmas ever happened
is that still you trust that the love of God
has taken on flesh and has come to live where you live...
among those who are in the struggle...
who are in the storm...
those who know the brokenness of this world
and are seeking to be faithful.
In other words, with you and me.