

Sermon 12-6-20 Isa. 40 1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Do you remember a last year
when Whit and I did an advent sermon series
ongoing to each of the four gospels' houses for Christmas?
Do you remember going to Mark's house?
Matthew has a really great nativity scene
in the front yard
and a really big star on the chimney
and Luke has this incredible angel display
and Gloria in Excelsis Deo
playing on repeat on his Bluetooth speaker.
John bought one of those outdoor light projectors
that shines stars all over the front of your house
...Mark is like the odd ball in the neighborhood
who doesn't even have a wreath on the front door.

Mark's gospel doesn't begin
where we like to begin
when it comes to the Christmas story,
does it?
Reading this on the 2nd Sunday of Advent
is almost like telling the story
of the Three Bears and starting with,

“Once upon a time
a little girl named Goldilocks
was fast asleep in a lovely little bed
—a bed that she thought
was just right for her.
But one morning as she opened her eyes
and prepared to stretch out her arms
...she was scared half to death
to see three bears staring at her!
So even though she was still in her pajamas,
Goldilocks jumped out of bed,
ran out of the house,
and then went on to start having a real adventure
as she tried to find her way back home

through a thick and dreadful forest.”¹

If we told our girls the story of the Three Bears this way,
they’d protest big time!

Dad, you forgot about the part

where the porridge is too hot!

Mom, you forgot about the part

where Goldilocks breaks Baby Bear’s chair!

You aren’t telling it right!

We’d never get away with a bedtime story
that begins in the middle.

But that’s exactly what Mark does.

Mark you forgot the part about the stars and angels.

You forgot the part about the shepherds—you aren’t telling it right!

Mark doesn’t bother with the virgin birth

or wise men from down East.

Matthew’s good news

begins with the birth of Jesus.

Luke begins with the birth of John;

and John begins with the beginning of time.

Mark decides to begin

with a voice crying out in the wilderness.

In one of my Looking East’s

or maybe it was Unending Easter

—I admitted to those of you that listen,

that I wanted to get back

to reading my Bible daily.

Well, I’ve been doing that

and I’m almost done with Deuteronomy

and I forgot how much time you spend

in the wilderness.

¹ Scott Hoezee, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/12209/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

Lots of chapters and verses spent out there,
wandering,
whining,
disobeying.

And now that it is close to Christmas,
I'm ready to be done with the wilderness.
All of it.

Aren't you?

Don't you want to be done with all **this** wilderness?

All this hopelessness?

All this uncertainty?

And now we 19 days from Christmas morning
and instead of the Gloria,
we hear a voice crying out in that wilderness.

But this voice is crying out
in that hopelessness,
crying out in that uncertainty,
crying out to all who might listen,
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight."

Wilderness does something to you,
I've heard.

You might see things in yourself
you've not seen before.

You might ask for wisdom
and be surprised by what you hear come back.

You might think you know the way out,
only to find yourself wandering
on dead end paths.

Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

How are we preparing this year?

Lots of our usual routines and traditions,
our usual Christmas customs
can't be done.

How are we preparing?

What does the path forward look like?

Are the days quieter?

Are the hours longer?

As Dennis mentioned this week

in his Looking East devotion,

this season, **this** Advent 2020

is unlike any advent we have experienced.

Wilderness some might call it.

So, on the second Sunday of Advent

we are beginning with Mark

telling us the story but leaving parts out.

Starting in the middle like this,

feels hurried,

almost like breaking news.

Everything in Mark's gospel is a rush,

is hurried,

is so fast paced

that Mark's favorite word seems to be,

immediately.²

I feel that speed take off

when read the opening verses of Mark.

This story feels like he's out breath telling it.

Almost like he's been

in the wilderness himself

but has found a path out

and now can't waste a moment

before telling us,

this is 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,'

(big breath)

² Ibid

but before I get to Jesus
I have to tell you,
 ‘As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight,”
 ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,
 proclaiming a baptism of repentance
 for the forgiveness of sins.

Because he isn't concerned
with the particulars of Jesus' birth,
Mark starts with baptism.
 A baptism by a wild-haired, prophet.
 Mark starts this good news
 with a baptism of repentance;
 that conscious, intentional
 turning of the heart and mind
 from what was former
to the new thing God will do in you.

A baptism of forgiveness and freedom,
liberation, death and resurrection.
 If Mark were the only gospel, we had
 —our December pageants,
 carols and hymns wouldn't exist.
 But if Mark were our only gospel
 the core of what **this** is all about
 would stay
 —this is the beginning
of the good news of Jesus Christ.

And **this** news
 this week
 begins with baptism.

I know there are lots of churches
 whose traditional practice

is what's called a believer's baptism.
And there is such beauty in that,
such maturity and faith.
When you decide you are ready
and can make the choice for yourself,
well, that moment
must be profound
and life transforming.
But I'm here to tell you,
if you can't be at the Jordan River in Israel,
the very next best thing
might be what we Presbyterians do,
what we call infant baptism.

You know what it is like to hold a baby.
They are delicate and warm
and sometimes wiggly.
And even when the baptism isn't for a baby-baby
—but for, what Tripp's 100-year-old grandad calls them,
a baptism for a walking baby
when those toddler eyes look up at you
a little curious and cautious,
wondering,
what this will feel like?

It is profound.
Because you know what?
There is something incredible
about an entire congregation of people
who simultaneously agree
to help bring up a child
into a life of faith.
There is something altogether life changing
holding a baby
or taking the hand of a child
and publicly claiming them,
out loud,
before God and all creation,

that no matter what,
this child of the covenant
has always belonged to God.

I love how we do baptisms.

Reading Mark, I guess you would call
Jesus' baptism a believer's baptism.
But you can't convince me
that God does not open the heavens
every single time a child,
a baby or
a person of their own free will
gets sprinkled,
dunked,
dipped,
covered
in holy water.

You can't convince me otherwise
that the chorus of heaven
isn't singing _.

So maybe I can see
why Mark starts his good news story
with baptism.

Our baptismal liturgy reminds us
that baptism marks the beginning of new life.
Baptism is not a *one and done*,
or *we can now check this off the list*, kind of tick.

At funerals we often say,
his baptism
or her baptism
is now complete.
Because what begins at baptism
is a life-long journey of faith
lived in the guidance and the power
of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is not an invisible protection
or a holy force-field.

We are baptized into a life
that will experience joy and sorrow.

A life that will strive to do the right thing,
even when doing the wrong thing.

Baptism marks a life

that wants to love and serve

but needs help and reminders along the way;

a life that needs a community

of support and encouragement.

And ultimately, this life of faith

begun in our baptisms

is about a life cultivated

to prepare the way of the Lord.

This life you and I live,

it is meant to mirror

the life of John the Baptist.

No, you don't have to be

a weird only bug-eating vegan.

But Mark knew what he was doing

when he starts his gospel

with this long-haired,

wilderness-living,

baptizing prophet.

Our lives,

when committed to the promises made in baptism,

are filled with the Holy Spirit,

and therefore, everything we do

is meant to point to the one

who is greater than us?

Not one of us was baptized to be Christ.

Not one of us

was claimed by God

to be *the savior*.

Not you,
not me.

But each and every one of us,
In our baptisms are claimed
so that our lives might point the way
to the one who brings freedom, liberation,
death and resurrection.

Our lives would be those
that prepared a way for the Lord
and his kingdom here and now.

Mark's Christmas story begins
with the good news and blessed assurance
that we are claimed by God
and in our baptisms,
whether we speak the words ourselves
or whether we're squirming
in a beautiful christening gown
in the preacher's arms—

in our baptisms the heavens open
and before God and all creation,
our life is given over
to help prepare the way.

So, "Yes, Virginia,
you can tell the story of Jesus
without Bethlehem's [stable]."³
Mark wants to begin his story
right when things go public,
before God and all creation,
right in the middle
because for Mark and for us,
the beginning is a life claimed by God.

³ ibid

And the good news is we can begin again
as many times as we need too
—we've already been marked and sealed.
It doesn't matter
whether you were baptized as a baby
and don't remember a thing.
It doesn't matter if you were baptized
When you were 14
or 37 years old.

It doesn't matter if you haven't been baptized yet
—right there is a good place to start.

All that is left us for us to tell the story
—and in this story
it doesn't matter where we start;
the beginning
or the middle.

Because the end of *the* story
is where it really all begins.

Benediction

Lately we've been using
the Dutch Reformed Church's
baptismal liturgy
where the story of faith
is told to a little one
...for you little one....

My favorite lines are when we've told the story
of creation,
covenant,
death and resurrection
and we say,

“All of this was done for you little one/
even though you do not know any of this yet/
we who love you/

will continue to tell you the story/
until it becomes your own.”

This Advent season as we prepare,
May we tell the story wherever it begins for us.