

Sermon – “Prepare the Way” Mark 1:1-8

The Christmas story, as we know it, comes mainly out of the Gospel writings of Matthew and Luke. However, as we read from the other gospels of Mark and John, their stories begin their knowledge of Jesus in different ways, leaving no doubt for us as their readers that Jesus is the central figure. As we know it, Mark was not one of the twelve disciples nor an Apostle. Still, the account of Mark leaned heavily upon the Apostle Peter for much of the eye-witness material of Jesus’ ministry. Secondly, although the shortest of the four gospels, Mark’s writing focused not on Jewish readers but instead on reaching a Gentile readership. Mark’s good news begins with an introduction to John the Baptist in such a way that it is clear that he believes that John is the one who comes as the messenger referred to in Isaiah 40. It was initially John who called on the Jewish people to repent and turn back to God so their sins could be forgiven. Thankfully, Mark is not our only gospel where we have three others composing wonderful portraits of Jesus that round out the picture, one in particular that provides enough delicate notes to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Before we dig into Mark’s message, let’s pause here and pray.

Father, just as You sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, please help us to clear the path to our hearts as well. Show us the distractions that hinder us from worshipping You this Advent. Lord, we eagerly await Your coming! We pray this in Your name, Amen.

The opening line of Mark’s gospel leaves me thinking about trying to figure out a story without knowing the past. What I mean is that the beginning doesn’t seem to fit the season of Advent. Essentially, what about getting back to the angels and shepherds and stars and wise men and the stall in Bethlehem and all that good stuff.? It seems like hearing a fractured fairy tale of “Cinderella or Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” It seems awkward. You know the story. “Once upon a time, a little girl named Goldilocks was fast asleep in a lovely little bed she thought was just right for her. Later, 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.” Wait a minute, that’s not where the story begins. It doesn’t make sense to tell it that way. You have to start at the beginning with porridge that’s too hot and all that stuff. Start over, teacher. Start at the absolute beginning. It’s Christmas. It’s Advent, and the last place we want to be in December is in the middle of some dry and dusty wilderness.

However, this is where Mark starts his story, and before we have even had time to figure out what that opening line means, Mark takes us back into the past to the words of a dusty old prophet named Isaiah from centuries earlier. Yet what we get from Mark is a New Testament evangelist who is constantly in a hurry to get the story of Jesus told, writing at a break-neck clip using the word “immediately,” as in right now, fast. Mark is fond of the word “immediately,” using it 41 times. In the Old Testament, the word appears a mere four times, and in the remainder of the New Testament, it appears only ten times. So, we get the picture of no time to lose, and yet the most incredible story ever told needs to be said, and Mark tells it this way because we need to face this world’s brokenness head-on. We need to greet the Savior of the world with repentance in hand.

Advent is the beginning of the new Church year. We reset the church clock and bring everything back to the starting line as the Son of God becomes flesh and comes into the world as a bouncing baby boy. It is the only time when the rest of the world vaguely tracks our efforts of evangelism in the truth and power of the gospel. In this contemporary world of Christianity, there remain many who have turned their back on the bible and have very little to say about who Jesus is and what he has done. If we were to take a look at any of the recent polls, and if they are accurate, we would find a lack of confidence or conviction of those professing faith in relation to the gospel. For us, it is vitally important for us to know, understand, and be prepared to share it with others.

One of the best ways to do that is to follow in the steps of Christ himself, open the gospels, and immerse ourselves in the good news. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the gospels and arguably the most mission-minded of any gospel writing. As I alluded to earlier, Mark leaves out significant parts that other gospel writers include. Mark is breaking new ground when he writes his gospel, for there was no such thing as persuasive writing about Jesus's life and ministry before Mark—virtually one-third of Mark's writing accounts for the last week of Jesus' life. For clarification, although Matthew's gospel is the first to appear in the New Testament, it is believed that Mark was the first to write a gospel account of Jesus. All of the gospel writings appear within the first 30 years of Jesus' death and resurrection to either affirm or deny. Not one person came forward to dispute their writings, and my friends, we cannot deny the significance.

True to the case of Mark, listen to the orderly account of Luke's gospel writing for the appearance of John the Baptist in Chapter 3, verse 1. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching the good news as is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet." Verifiable historical data and I could go on with all the wealth of manuscripts and academic credibility collected throughout history that make the New Testament by far the best-attested text of any ancient writing in the world. I tell you all of this because it is the unbelievers who say the bible is simply a collection of fairy tales and fables.

Yet for all the attention the world and the Church give to this season of Advent and Christmas, and all that goes along with this season, Mark is here to remind us that even all of that is not really the beginning of the gospel. The Christmas story is not the beginning. No, it is only the beginning of a cosmic tale so vast we will never comprehend it, but we can only let ourselves get gracefully and delightfully caught up in it all. If someone who had not gone to church in fifty years were to slide into a pew somehow in December, they would not be the least surprised to hear what Scripture readings were being read and what music was played and sung.

In the beginning, what Mark wants us to understand is a new creation story parallel with the first creation story read in Genesis 1. A voice calling out in the void of the wilderness to create a new world. For those who know C. S. Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia," and the book "The Magician's Nephew" when children witness Aslan creating Narnia through his lone voice singing in the pre-creation darkness, there is an image "in the darkness, something was

happening at last.” A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away, and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes, it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes, he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise ever heard. It was so beautiful he could barely eat it. Then, two wonders happened at the exact moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices, more voices than you could count. They were in harmony with it but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They did not come out gently one by one as on a summer evening. One moment, there had been nothing but darkness; the next moment, a thousand points of light leaped out. If you had seen and heard it, you would have felt quite sure that it was the First Voice, the deep one, which had made them appear and made them sing.”

Imagine the voice of the prophet Isaiah calling out in the darkness, looking forward to the coming Messiah to the children of Israel and going back to their land. It is an important chapter referring to restoration. In Chapter 9, we see ourselves getting ourselves up on a high mountain to hear the bearer of good news. Listen up! The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, for to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

It’s a story of a new King of a new era of peace, blessing, and salvation. And so, Mark tells the story of a new beginning, for the king has not fully taken his throne, but yet one day he will in an earthly way, and His name is Jesus.

As we prepare to celebrate, preparing the way for the first Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us also remember the purpose for which he came: We hear the angels proclaiming, “Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” Jesus who came to bring you and me back to God through repentance and faith in His death on the cross as payment for our sins. The people of John the Baptist Day responded to his call. How have we answered Jesus’ call to follow him?