

Christmas at Mark's House
Isaiah 53:1-6 Mark 1:1-11
December 1, 2019

Dr. Charles B. Hardwick
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

OT Reading: Isaiah 53:1-6

Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by others;

a man of suffering^[a] and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces^[b]

he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities

and carried our diseases;

yet we accounted him stricken,

struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,

and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have all turned to our own way,

and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

Pre-New Testament Comments

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and our theme is “Coming Home for Christmas.” Each week in worship we’re looking at a different Gospel—Mark, then Matthew, then Luke, then John—to see how it is that Jesus comes home to be with us...that is, how it is that each author introduces Jesus on to the scene. We’re using this book, *Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes*, by Cynthia Campbell, the President Emerita of McCormick Theological Seminary. I hope you’ll buy a copy after church and read along with it.

Let’s listen now to how Jesus comes home to be with us in the Gospel of Mark.

NT (Primary) Reading: Mark 1:1-11 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his

sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And 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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Sermon 9:00 and 11:00 am

So where is the little town of Bethlehem? Where are the angels we have heard on high? What about the Three Kings of Orient are? Where is the infant lowly, infant holy? Mary, did you know that you’re nowhere to be found at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark?

Nowhere to be found. None of this is in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, Jesus comes home to us first as a full-grown adult, ready to be baptized by John the Baptist. There’s no infant baptism for Mary and Joseph; Jesus is around 30 when he comes onto the scene in the book of Mark.

Mark gets right to it: He announces that Jesus is the Son of God, gives us a prelude about John the Baptist, and then speeds through Jesus’ baptism. The heavens split open, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and God tells Jesus,

You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased.
That’s the way Jesus comes on the scene in Mark.

If you stick around for the rest of this sermon series—and if you’re the kind of people who come to church the Sunday after Thanksgiving, you’re probably

the kind of people who will come to church the rest of December—you'll see that Mark tells a different story than Matthew or Luke or John.

Each author had to figure out how he wanted to tell Jesus' story. God inspired each one of them, but God didn't put them in a trance or feed them the story word by word. That's one way that we Christians are different from some other religious traditions. Muslims, for instance, believe that Allah gave Muhammed the Koran word for word—so it can't be changed in any way, or even translated into another language without its losing what makes it special. Mormons believe that an angel whispered the words of their sacred book directly into Joseph Smith's ears.

But we Christians—especially we Presbyterian Christians—believe that God used Matthew's, and Mark's, and Luke's, and John's own gifts as writers to figure out the best way to tell the story. They each had their own perspective, and each decided what to include and what not to include in their story.

It's a little bit like how Mr. Rogers has been depicted in two prominent movies over the last two years. (And yes, I realize this is the second sermon since I've been here when I've talked about Fred Rogers. But if you can't preach about the Patron Saint of Presbyterians on Thanksgiving, when can you?)

Last year a movie about his life was made by director Morgan Neville. He decided that "Won't you be my neighbor?" would be a documentary that pieced together Mr. Rogers' story through interviews, video clips from the long-running show, and newscasts of what was going on throughout his ministry.

Then this year, director Marielle Heller decided to make "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" starring Tom Hanks. She thought the best way to tell his story would be to base it on an article in Esquire magazine back in November

1998, describing an unlikely friendship between the journalist who wrote that article and our favorite Presbyterian pastor.

One story; two different filmmakers; two different perspectives on one life. It gives us a glimpse into why Mark would start his Gospel differently from Matthew and Luke and John.

Mark has his own style—in the book we’re studying this Advent (*Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes*), Cynthia Campbell says Mark is like the detective who says, “Just the facts, Ma’am.” He writes sparsely. He spends two verses on Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (which comes right after our passage), while Matthew spends 11 on the same story.

Take a look at the picture on the front page of the bulletin. Artist and architect Kevin Burns depicts each of the four Gospels’ perspectives on Jesus’ arrival with a drawing of a house in our study book. Here’s what he said about this picture:

In thinking about the nature of the Gospel of Mark, I found myself pondering the fundamental essentials of the concept of “house.” I was drawn to images of the most basic dwellings seen across the rural landscapes that are ubiquitous to many agrarian societies in many countries....Mark’s Gospel is much the same way in how it portrays the fundamental nature of Christ.

Kevin wanted a very basic house to depict the very basic way that Mark writes. “Just the facts.” “Just the roof, four walls and a couple of windows.”

Let’s get right to the story, Mark says, and he starts it out with Jesus as an adult. He skips all of the Christmas trappings to get moving toward Passion Week. He’s marching toward the cross, almost as soon as his story gets going.

There are sixteen chapters in his Gospel, and five of them are about Holy Week and one of them is about Easter. And of the first ten chapters, three of them have explicit conversations about Jesus' death and resurrection...and the conflict with the authorities that leads to his crucifixion begins in chapter one.

So when we think about why Mark would skip Christmas, I think the primary reason is because Mark worries we'll miss his focus if he brings in the baby Jesus. Seems to me Mark knows we can't take our eyes off a baby.

Whenever there's an infant baptism here, the congregation comes alive. Will she cry? Will he wave? And when Kristie walks the baby around the sanctuary, our faces light up, looking at all the promise of new life, right there making gurgling noises right at us.

I think Mark knows we can't take our eyes off a baby, so he decides not to distract us with the baby Jesus and Christmas. He doesn't want us to miss the story that he wants to tell—the story of Jesus, the Son of God, whose road to the cross begins almost as soon as he appears on the scene. For Mark, it seems, Palm Sunday and Good Friday and Easter are much more important than Christmas.

That might seem weird to us in Advent. This is the season when we sing “O Come O Come Emmanuel”—Come, God with us. The story of Advent and Christmas is the story of a God who came all the way down from heaven, into our houses, to walk with us. It's the story of the Incarnation: that God is one of us, that God understands what we're going through, and that God shares in our grief.

That's good news we need to hear. This week I've been walking with a member in the hospital whose days are coming to a close. She and her family

need to know that God understands the pain that they are going through, that Jesus is really Emmanuel, God with us. That's the good news of Christmas

But I think Mark would say that it's not quite enough to know the good news of Christmas, that God is with us in Jesus. When our days are drawing near, we need the good news of Holy Week, too. We need to know that Jesus has victory over our sin. We need to know he's won our salvation on the cross and the empty tomb. For Mark, the good news of Good Friday and Easter is even more important than the good news of Christmas.

The baby we can't take our eyes off becomes the crucified God that we want to avoid looking at, and then the risen Lord whose radiant light blinds us.

Mark tells us that when this God comes onto the scene, the heavens split open. Thanks be to God that they are still open for you and for me, both today and at the end of our days.

And so today, from Mark, and from me, Merry Christmas, and Happy Easter.