

Advent: from Mark's Perspective

First Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Why in the world, you may be wondering, did the pastor just read the story of Jesus' baptism on the First Sunday of Advent, when we are supposed to be preparing for the birth of the baby Jesus on Christmas Day? I'm kind of wondering that myself. The answer involves a group of us, including the Rev. Cathy Elliot, John Gammie, and PJ Brobston, along with the Worship & Music ministry team, deciding to approach the liturgical season of Advent from a different perspective this year. Let me explain.

The purpose of the season of **Advent**, which is a Latin word that simply means 'arrival' or 'coming,' is to help us prepare for the celebration of the birth – the arrival – of an infant named Jesus, who the gospels reveal as the Son of God. Advent is also meant to emphasize the coming of Christ into our midst in this day and age, and according to scripture, at some final point in the future. The assigned lectionary Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent each year, therefore, focuses on the **themes of waiting, expectation, hope, and being alert and watchful for the time when God's kingdom will find it's fulfillment** – as in the "End Times," or what is called the "Second Coming." The traditional message of the season of Advent, then, is a reminder that **we are living in-between times**: that is, between "Christ has come" and "Christ will come again." Or as many refer to it, **between the "now" and the "not yet."**

In breaking from tradition this year, however, we will not be following the lectionary passages typically assigned for this 4-Sunday period of time before Christmas. Instead, the focus will be on how Jesus' arrival, his advent, is presented through the individual perspective of each of the four Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That helps explain why the worship bulletin cover this morning displays icons of the four gospel writers.

The general consensus of modern biblical scholars is that each of these authors, often referred to as the Four Evangelists, wrote his version of Jesus' life and ministry for a specific audience, or faith community of which he was a part. Each author, therefore, came to this monumental task with a somewhat different perspective. The goal of faithful biblical interpretation, therefore, involves admittedly inexact efforts to **understand the specific points each author may be trying to make within the context in which he wrote. So it is very important that we enter into the literary world created by each individual author.** I have found that this makes scripture come alive much more than trying to combine themes and meanings from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all together.

Now, you may have noticed on the worship bulletin cover that it is only Mark, of the four, that is in color. Why are we starting with the Gospel of Mark instead of following the biblical order that begins with Matthew? Simple. Contrary to the eventual order of the New Testament, **the Gospel of Mark was the first of the gospels to have been written**, probably sometime between the years 65-70 CE. Scholars believe Mark

was first because most of the material in this gospel appears, almost word for word, in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, who both, it is concluded by common sense, used Mark's gospel as a primary resource for their own work. Also, since Mark often explains Jewish customs that may be unfamiliar and translates Aramaic words, his Gospel was probably written for a Gentile audience. More specifically, it is likely that it was intended for Rome and occasioned by Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians from 64-67 CE. That's why **suffering and radical discipleship are major themes in Mark's Gospel.**

Mark begins his gospel by introducing John the Baptist. This, in turn, is followed immediately by the story of the baptism of Jesus. In Mark, then, there are no angelic visitations to Mary or Joseph, no story of a visit between Mary and Elizabeth (John the Baptist's mother), no trip to Bethlehem, no baby Jesus laying in a manger, no shepherds out in their fields, no wise men following a star, no fleeing to Egypt to escape a threatened King Herod. No, all of these elements are part of the **birth narratives** only found in Matthew and Luke, which were written more than a decade or so after Mark. We will look at these in the weeks ahead.

Instead, the Gospel of Mark jumps right into the events that launched Jesus on his mission and ministry. **Jesus' baptism**, which Mark describes as the heavens being torn apart and God's Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, serves a couple of important functions. First, it **identifies Jesus as God's Son**, the Beloved. And in essence it also serves the purpose of what we would call an **ordination – the empowering of the Holy Spirit for the work and ministry to which he was called by God.**

So just like that, Mark's action-packed version of the arrival – the advent – of Jesus has him immediately up and running, ready for ministry. I like how our own John Gammie poetically reflects on Mark's particular perspective in the liturgy he wrote for the lighting of this morning's Advent Wreath Candle.

Mark speaks to us in simple Greek, in the present tense, urgently, almost breathlessly - John the Baptist appears and then Jesus, proclaiming the Kingdom of God - as if to say: 'What precisely happened before does not matter - we are all called *now* and have work to do to make hope real. Advent is now. Hope is now. And we are part of it.'

There is no "origin story," so to speak, in the Gospel of Mark. Any narrative of Jesus' birth was evidently not important to Mark's overall perspective of Jesus' life and ministry. Instead, he presents us with a sense of urgency. Jesus' story simply begins with his empowerment by the Holy Spirit, including the assurance that God is with him and is well pleased, and his being sent out to begin his ministry.

One of the traditional ways to interpret the Bible is to put ourselves, and/or our community of faith, into the perspective of each character in every story to see what it might reveal. Doing that in this case, **we can come to understand and live into our own baptism, that we, like Jesus, are empowered by the Holy Spirit; that we, too, are assured that God is with us and is well pleased since you and I are created as a child of God; and that we, too, are sent out for works of ministry in our church life and in our daily life.**

It's true, this congregation, and each of us as individuals, is being called right now to recognize and acknowledge God's Sacred Presence with us and within us. Also, we are to recognize and acknowledge that we have work to do. And in the context of the message of the first candle of the Advent Wreath, **we are being called to bring**

hope to others, to live in hope, and to make hope real in our lives and in the world. And yes, there is a sense of urgency in that calling.

So I ask you this question: **What can you do, this very day, to be an instrument of hope to those around you: in your home, at work, and in the world each day?** Heaven knows, literally, how much the world is in need of hope right now, given all that's going on around the globe as we speak. Patrick David Heery, editor of *Presbyterians Today* magazine, wrote an article this week entitled, "**Inhale: Hope for seemingly hopeless times.**" Reflecting on the troubling events of recent weeks, he warns:

The temptation, I think, in these times, is to throw up our hands in defense and desperately try to hold at bay the fear, grief, and impending loss.

Some of us plaster smiles on our faces. Some of us take a different approach, doubling our efforts, creating endless projects and programs, thinking we can "fix" this. We throw ourselves into work, or denial, or oddly comforting cynicism, hoping to build a wall that guards our fragile, increasingly pressed borders.

The problem is that those defenses don't work. Eventually, the wall crumbles, the smile twists, and the projects only tax our already-failing energy.

So where can we find hope in this season of Advent? Heery reminds us, "Hope, it turns out, is *not* the absence of evil or loss. It is not the expectation that all will go well. Christ, our greatest hope, was born under threat and calamity—his refugee flight to Egypt accompanied by the wail of parents, their children murdered by Herod."

We've indeed been hearing a lot about refugees lately, especially those hoping to come to America to flee the continually-wicked situation in Syria. Though there is not enough time this morning, I have a lot I'd like to say about this issue, particularly in connection to what we profess to believe as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth we are preparing to celebrate on Christmas Day. I could start by sharing dozens of scripture passages that call us to share hospitality and compassion specifically with the alien and stranger in our midst.

Amidst a cacophony of often-fearful voices and opinions, including most every politician, I was pleased to read in yesterday's *Tulsa World* newspaper about a measured response to the refugee crisis – one that provides hope. Deacon Kevin Sartorius, executive director of **Catholic Charities** in the Diocese of Tulsa, the only sanctioned refugee settlement agency in this part of the state, seeks to **find a balance between our safety and our values**. Concerning the responsibilities of government on the national, state and local levels, he recommends:

Establish safety, but once that's done, we have an obligation to offer charity, to offer Christ's love to those who are suffering.

I would add that since it is our understanding that *all* people are children of God, the suggestion to allow only Syrian refugees who are Christians into this country is one of the most un-Christian, let alone un-American, things I have ever heard. **While I'm not a big fan of the following phrase, I think this entire refugee situation actually requires that**

we ask, "What would Jesus do?"

I believe that Jesus would offer hope, and calls us to do the same. For is it not impossible to offer and extend Christ-like hope to others if categorical discrimination is built into the system and process? **And following the perspective of the Gospel of Mark, there is a sense of urgency, in that "we are all called now and have work to do to make hope real. Advent is now. Hope is now. And we, individually and together, are part of it."**

Amen.