

## Christmas in the Gospels *Mark's Messenger*

Mark 1:1-3, 9-13

December 3, 2023

Perhaps you have heard there is a war on Christmas. Santa setups crowding out Nativity scenes. Secular songs replacing traditional carols. The celebration of this holy day upended by generic greetings in recognition of a nondescript season. The term has been with us for nearly twenty years, making it (according to one commentary) "America's latest forever war." Now I understand the controversy, but I would suggest that we've misidentified the threat. From my vantage point as a pastor, Christmas seems to be holding up rather well. I imagine we'll have quite a crowd here three weeks from today. Scripture's story will take center stage, and we'll sing the carols we know by heart.

Advent, on the other hand, is under attack. Ask most folks when the Christmas season begins, and you're likely to hear "as soon as the leftovers are gone" or "when the calendar turns to December." After all, Christmas follows Thanksgiving, as every child's calendar and grocery store display clearly communicates. Advent, the season of the church year that begins today and takes us all the way to Christmas Eve, is threatened. In fact, there's a kind of cold war on Advent. The strategy is subtle. The tactic: total disregard, refusal to acknowledge the season's existence. And for the record, I do not count Williams Sonoma's \$200 "Luxury Advent Calendar" as an exception.

It is not hard to understand why we avoid Advent. It's the season of waiting. That's a tough sell. When we were putting up our Christmas tree and our lights last weekend, our son Samuel asked me if I'd be preaching Christmas sermons now. I tried to explain to our fourth grader a bit about Advent, but he tried

to help me out in return. "Dad, I think people like the Christmas sermons better."

He is not wrong. The longing for Christmas joy and holy light is reasonable. We want Christmas, right this very minute. Advent stands in our way. Waiting is not the thing. It's the thing that comes before the thing. It must be endured.

But, hear me out for a moment. What if the waiting is a gift we need? What if the season of Advent is the only true path to Christmas?

The billboard on the side of the road asks, "Are you prepared to meet Jesus?" That's the right question for the Advent season. These four Sundays give us time. Time to prepare—not our homes, but our hearts. Think of it. How many times have you reached Christmas and found yourself wondering where the time went? Advent is our invitation to wait on purpose. To wait *with purpose*.

This season at Second, we're going to take a different path to Christmas. Actually, four different paths, because the Bible is not a solo act; it is a chorus of witnesses.

So, this December we're going to pause in each of the four Gospels to listen for what Christmas preparation sounds like there.

And we begin with the earliest and most succinct Gospel. We start with Mark. And, at first glance, you might think there isn't much to say about Christmas in Mark. (Shortest sermon ever!) No pageant. There are no shepherds, no wise men, no stable, no star, no baby lying in a manger. Mark seems completely unaware that any of that ever happened.

Mark does not decorate his Gospel with tinsel and bright lights. He has no tree. And perhaps that is the best reason for us to begin here. Mark is all about Advent. In Mark's Gospel, you can feel the weight of the waiting. Mark may not dwell on the birth of a baby, but he knows where to find God in human form.

He describes how Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan. He gives us a message of hope in words spoken by a heavenly voice. "You are my son. I love you."

That's a beautiful moment, but it's just a moment. Immediately (that's Mark's favorite word), Jesus is driven into the wilderness. In fact, that's where we find Mark's messenger. And so, it's where we find ourselves at the start of this season.

In Mark's Gospel, the wilderness is both setting and character. It's where his story begins. Calling on the words of the prophet Isaiah, Mark speaks of a messenger preparing the way for the miraculous. *A voice crying out in the wilderness. What does the voice say? Prepare the way of the Lord.* In the wilderness, prepare the way.

Mark may not tell us where Jesus was born, but he knows where Jesus can be found. *In the wilderness.*

And that's good news for we who know the wilderness. You may wish you didn't, but you do. The war on Advent may insist that we can skip Mark's story altogether and run straight to Christmas angels. But Mark's messenger has something to teach us. Jesus meets us in the wilderness.

So, this December, resist the urge to rush ahead, to turn up the Christmas songs and drown out the voices crying out. This year, sit in the discomfort of a world still waiting. Wait with families who keep vigil for loved ones held hostage, and those who huddle in basements as bombs drop overhead. Stand in the shoes of patients whose medical tests brought ominous news. Remain with all who dread the coming of nightfall or fear the dawn of a new day.

When we are in the wilderness, we can acknowledge the truth that all of us cause and carry pain. That we are deeply divided by calcified conviction with no commitment to conversation. That we exist in chaos created by violence and injustice. That fear grips us. Mark knows that what we lack is not the syrupy sentimentalism of a secularized sacred season. What we need is hope. Hope in signs and symbols, in wonders and in words.

In the wilderness, we hear the promise that provides a path. *You are my child. I love you.*

That's Christmas in Mark's Gospel: the assurance that God's grace does not, will not, cannot, leave us. The Advent gift that Mark offers us is the courage to wait in the wilderness, where Jesus can be found. The place where hope is most needed is the place where God is most present.

I don't know what the wilderness looks like for you this year. I do not know the specific burdens you bear or the heaviness you carry into this season. I do know that you could name them one by one. Whatever it is that wakes you in the middle of the night. Whatever won't let go of your heart. Whatever occupies your mind. I know that the whole world feels a bit like a wilderness this year, that we're all wandering in search of signs of hope flashing like points of light against a sea of darkness. I know that we're searching for reasons to rejoice—not the empty calories of a forced or false merriment that withers like grass and fades like summer flowers, but hope. Sturdy hope.

And Mark tells us that this hope is often found in the least expected places. That it's often found right next to pain. That hope stands side-by-side with sadness whenever we open our hearts to receive it.

Miss Lena never missed the annual Christmas caroling in the neighborhoods near Vandalia Presbyterian Church. In fact, in her eighty years, no one among us could remember a time when Miss Lena had missed anything. Not worship or a youth car wash or a fellowship dinner or a Bible study. But certainly not the

Christmas caroling, for which she always provided her world-famous pound cake.

But this year had been different. Miss Lena's husband of fifty-eight years, Edmund, had died at the beginning of December, and we were all worried about her. She seemed suddenly somehow frail and fragile. And then, the morning of the caroling, the phone call came. I heard my father on the other end of the line reassure Miss Lena that we would persevere without her. She just wasn't feeling too well. She would need to skip the caroling this year.

As we left our final stop and prepared to return to the church, my younger sister, Emily, had an idea. If Miss Lena could not come sing with us, then we should go sing to Miss Lena. The adults in the group were unanimously dead set against it. They did not want to impose on a grieving woman or be a bother. But nine-year-old Emily was insistent, and she rallied a dozen determined kids to her side of the argument. Before we knew it, we piled back in the vans and made our way to Miss Lena's house.

When we arrived, the front porch light came on. She stepped onto the screened porch and welcomed us with tears in her eyes. Then she sat down on the couch. I remember it so well. Emily sat next to her. Miss Lena cried through every note of every song. That night she wept openly, without one shred of self-consciousness or shame. And many of us wept as well.

Listen. Our hope will be found not only in festive gatherings or choirs of angels singing *Gloria*. We will find hope in the wilderness, where the tenderness of vulnerable love is spoken in hushed tones. The grieving woman rests her hand on the teenage boy's shoulder, singing Silent Night as tears fall. And hope holds us in the real world, where our lives and God's life are woven together, and where peace and love and joy coexist with sadness and pain and loss.

You may have missed them, but there are angels in Mark's Christmas story. They do not blow trumpets or sing praise to God in the highest heaven. In fact, they aren't in heaven at all. You already know where they are. In the wilderness. With the wild beasts. You already know what they're doing. Waiting.

So don't rush. Just linger. Just trust. Just hope. Just wait. Just listen for a voice you know by heart and a promise you need to hear. *You are my child. I love you. I always will. Amen.*