

Augusta First Baptist Church
Mark 1:1-8
God With Us...Just Ask Mark
December 10, 2006
Advent 2006

*NRS Mark 1:1 The **beginning** of the **good news** of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will **prepare your way**; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

For the season of Advent we are looking at each of the four gospels and how they tell the story of "God With Us" in their own unique voices. Today we look at how the Gospel of Mark shares the message "God With Us." I think Mark begins with an implied question, "Are you ready?"

Are you ready for Christmas? I have fond recollections from childhood of my grandmother readying for Christmas by weeks and weeks of baking, boiling and kneading her way to December 25th. The kitchen and spare bedroom of her simple house would be stacked high with *Tupperware* containers filled with high calorie treats. Each year we could expect lady fingers, date nut balls, divinity, and peanut butter fudge. Just before Christmas Day she would buy a few coconuts (we never could grow any in Putnam County) and grate them for a homemade coconut cake. One year, my brothers and I decided to help grate the coconuts but failed to properly wash up before plunging into the task at hand. Instead of a pearly white color, the cake looked more like a mud hut on the side of the creek. Needless to say the cake never made it to the table.

Another year my grandmother was inspired to try something new. She had read a recipe in a magazine for rum balls. Like any good southern lady of her time, my grandmother was a staunch tee-totaler, but she had always heard you can cook the alcohol out. She dispatched my father to go in the dark of night, so no one would see, and purchase a bottle of rum to make rum balls. Like most grandmothers, she did not always work with measurements so she added rum to the mixture according to what she thought looked right. Take my word for it, minors had no business eating those rum balls! When we took the lid off of the container of rum balls, eyes would water and the elderly would wheeze.

This year it would appear folks have been getting ready for Christmas since August. What I suspect most people are readying themselves is to be over Christmas. And that is too bad, but understandable because we have been getting ready for the wrong things.

Mark is a message of readiness. He quotes from Isaiah, "Prepare the way," which is a way of saying "get the debris and clutter out of the way." Mark spends no time – that's "0" – speaking of the birth of Jesus. I find this initially disappointing. Births are a big deal for every age. Ask any minister – we would much rather visit someone in the hospital who has just had a baby than for most any other reason. We like to slap backs, extend hearty handshakes and hugs and point out the rose on the altar rail indicating a child is born. Mark chooses to leave the birth story completely out. There is nothing about the miraculous events leading up to his birth – no angelic apparitions, no pondering Joseph or confused Mary. In fact, Joseph is never mentioned in the gospel of Mark and Mary is only once identified as the mother of Jesus. There are no wise men, no mangers, and no shepherds. None. When we get to Jesus in Mark's gospel he is already a grown man of about 30 years of age. For Mark, it was not important *how* Jesus got here. What matters to Mark is whether or not we are ready for Jesus.

That's a good question. Are we ready for Christmas? If we are going to measure our readiness against Christmas shopping, then I have to say emphatically "no." I am most definitely not ready. Most people who know anything about me know to leave me alone on Christmas Eve because that is when I go shopping.

What about you? Are you ready for Christmas? Have you finished all the shopping, all the decorating, all the baking? Do you still feel like something is missing? A few years ago while serving another church I rounded the corner of my study and came face to face with a member of the Interior Decorating Committee (the IDC). Now folks, they can be a tough bunch, clamping down hard on blatant and willful tackiness, and twice quarantining off the office suite. This time we all had a problem. They were setting up one of the church's Nativity scene, or crèche, and a piece was missing. Was it a wise man, a camel, a donkey, a shepherd? No, much worse—Jesus. Jesus was missing.

Now you can't have a Nativity scene without Jesus. We all know that. And you cannot have Christmas without Jesus. We may indeed be ready for Christmas when it comes to shopping or decorating or baking. But are we ready for Jesus?

That is what Mark wants to know. So, instead of beginning with the traditional birth stories surrounding Jesus, Mark begins with John the Baptist. Now what in the world does this fanatic dressed in fur and leather, and long, long hair and a beard to match, who grocery shops at the natural health food stores for grasshoppers and wild honey, have to do with Christmas? John the Baptist has to be Martha Stewart's worst nightmare! He doesn't even get his own figure at our Nativity scenes.

Believe it or not, John the Baptizer's role is central. Mark begins with John, because John is the one who calls ahead and says prepare, get ready, get the debris out of the way and remove all the clutter. God is doing something big in our midst!

Nowadays we rarely make visits unannounced. We don't like to drop in on folks without giving them the opportunity to get prepared. The customary thing to do is give a little warning in the way of a phone call. "We would like to come by and see you." This is sort of an unofficial warning to get your house in order, put a pot of coffee on, and get dressed appropriately.

Theologically, that is what John was doing: get ready, Jesus is coming! There is no rushing to Bethlehem with Mark because Mark knows that if we are not prepared for Christ then we will not see Christ – not in a manger, not with Mary and Joseph, not in Bethlehem, not anywhere.

Mark says to...

Be Prepared in the Least Likely Places

Verses 3 and 4 indicate that John came proclaiming the message in the wilderness; the same wilderness that Jesus would be baptized in, driven to and tempted. You have already heard my series on the wilderness. You know that when the Bible speaks of wilderness it is not just talking about a geographic location but also a theological decision. And who would think to look for the Son of God in such an unlikely place as the wilderness?

This Christmas – like all other times of the year – there is no telling where you will encounter the presence of Christ. Our sanctuary will be crowded throughout the next few weeks as people push their way inside to hear the music of our choirs and join in with the masses for communion. And I hope that this will be place to experience Jesus.

Particularly during this time of year, we spend more energy speaking of all the predictable ones who saw Christ – the shepherds, the wise men, and so on; but I am reminded of a sermon a former pastor of this church, Chuck Bugg, preached: “There were so many who didn’t see, because they just didn’t expect God.”

John the Baptist knows that unless we are prepared we will not see either. Be prepared in the least likely of places.

Wherever love and grace are practiced, I believe we will find Jesus. But you have to choose to look. For about three years both my grandmother and Amy’s mother resided in a nursing home. I tell you they were tough years because we saw dear people whose bodies and minds were being whittled down by mortality. But there were also moments of great tenderness. Have you ever noticed that in nursing homes there are residents who take care of each other? Helping with eating, or cleaning up, or when one resident wanders in the wrong room another one tenderly guides them safely back to their room?

I say it again, wherever love and grace are practiced, I believe we will find Jesus. But you have to choose to look ...in the AA meetings...in foster care home, and many more places.

And much of the time we are just not prepared for God with us in these unlikely places:

...God with us in the hallways of the hospitals and high schools.

...God with us in our politics and in our play

...God with us in the shopping malls

Look for Jesus in the least likely places, *and...*

Be Prepared in the Least Likely Faces

In fact, that is the whole nature of the incarnation - God coming to this world in human flesh – unlikely and improbable, yet God did.

You see, we really are not that well prepared to see Jesus as Mark presents him. Mark describes the coming of Jesus into this world in very human terms. There is no other gospel that rivals Mark’s understanding of Jesus’ humanity.

“Jesus loves you...” from the vagrant stranger.

“Jesus loves you...” from the stammering resident of an Alzheimer’s wing.

As my professor Walter Brueggemann writes: “The only way God can be imaged is through our humanness.”

In order to be prepared to see Jesus in the least likely places and the least likely of faces we need to...

Be Prepared to Change Course

The preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus differed, in that John proclaimed the coming of Jesus and Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, but both proclaimed repentance.

Repentance - what a curious word for this Christmas season, but oh, how appropriate. Repentance means to change course, change the direction one is traveling. Is there anyone here this morning that thinks they just might be heading in **the wrong direction** this Advent, this Christmas?

It is easy to do. Retailers say happiness is in materialism. Buy more of the latest and greatest and experience the joys of Christmas. Hedonists say happiness is moving from one great party to the next. Goodness knows I love these Christmas parties, but I also know we cannot live abdicating responsibility while we sing the hymn of eat, drink and be merry.

But, it is not just that. We think we are on the right course most of the time. We want Jesus. We want to experience the presence of God, and have our life renewe. Well, of course we do. But, we think the course is going to be easy. Why, we think, we’ll just go to the book store and buy the latest prayer that will change our life, or the latest CD that will transform our hearts or the latest 5-step formula for healing and success. But John proclaims that the coming of Jesus means we have to change course – Repent. Be ready in the least likely of places, and in the least likely of faces, and so, be prepared to change direction and get the debris and clutter out of the way.

Change your expectations this Christmas! Change, Frederick Buechner puts it this way: “Turn *away from* madness, cruelty, shallowness, blindness. Turn *toward* that tolerance, compassion, sanity, hope, justice which we all have in us at our best.”

Change, and pray for change, starting with ourselves. See the world differently and you will act differently.

The interesting thing is that the only way to Bethlehem is through the desert, the wilderness. If we want to hear Jesus this Christmas, to know him and experience him as never before, we will need to change our direction as John insists, and make our way through the wilderness—on the other side is Bethlehem. There are no short-cuts.

Are you ready?