

In the Beginning Sermon Series
Hitting the Ground Running
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Do you ever feel like you're missing something? A few months back, Amy and I started watching a new show together. We'd heard great things about it, so we were excited to get it going. We popped some popcorn, turned on our fake fireplace, hitched up the recliners, and pressed "play." The show started out good but a little confusing, and the longer it went on, the more perplexed we got. It was as if we were supposed to know what's going on. Amy asked, "Did you start at the beginning?" I said I did and paused the show to double-check. Well, I did start at the beginning...of season seven.

Reading the beginning of the gospel of Mark is like starting Jesus' life with season 7. You read the opening paragraph expecting angels and mangers and lowing cattle and an eight-pound six-ounce newborn infant Jesus with his gold fleece diapers and his little balled-up fists, and instead you get Isaiah and a prophecy and some guy eating locusts. When we first meet Jesus in the ninth verse, he's already a grown man. Mark's gospel hits the ground running. Did we miss something? Why doesn't Mark begin at the beginning? For our Advent sermon series, we're going to look at the beginning of each gospel to see what it does or doesn't tell us about the birth of Jesus Christ.

To understand why Mark's gospel begins this way, we have to understand the context in which it was written. Mark is most likely the first gospel that was written, probably in the 50s or 60s, about 20-30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Up to that point, the stories about Jesus had been passed down orally in a giant game of Telephone. The first written accounts we have of Jesus are some of Paul's letters, but he never says a word about the circumstances of Jesus' birth. That has led some folks to question the authenticity of the birth stories being told around the water cooler. A virgin birth? An angelic choir telling a group of lowly shepherds about the birth of the Messiah? Did those stories really happen, or were they just made them up?

That didn't matter to Mark because that wasn't his focus. When I used to review movies, I rarely commented on the lighting or the background actors, but that didn't mean those things didn't exist. I just chose not to focus on them. To me, they weren't important to the story. Likewise, for Mark, the birth narrative wasn't important to the version of Jesus' story he was trying to tell. We want to know all that had happened with Jesus, his birth, his childhood, what kind of grades he got in school. Did he have birthday parties? Was he in the band in high school? Not Mark's point. It was only about 10-20 years later that Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels and decided to add the birth stories.

So, if Mark wasn't trying to tell us about the birth of Jesus, what WAS Mark trying to say? Mark wasn't writing an unbiased biography of Jesus; he had an agenda for everything he included and left out, and as the shortest of the four gospels, he left out a lot. Mark gives us his thesis statement in the very first line: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." Right away, Mark makes a proclamation about who Jesus is that would have caused quite a stir among his readers.

You see, Mark was writing in the time of the Roman Empire to a group of Jews and Gentiles who were fully immersed in that Greco-Roman culture. The relatively peaceful time in which they were living – the "Pax Romana" – was forged by the iron fist of the Roman emperor,

who was so powerful that he was considered divine. When the emperor says he's divine, you'd best not argue with him. But Mark is doing just that by making this claim. He's saying that the true son of God, the true Messiah, is Jesus Christ, not Caesar, and that Jesus' arrival is good news.

But before we even meet Jesus, we meet John the Baptist, who has an important message for his listeners and for us today: Get ready. Jesus is coming. Isaiah's prophecy says, "Prepare the way of the Lord." We know all about preparation for Christmas, don't we? That's what Advent is about. "Let every heart prepare him room." We decorate our sanctuary. We put up Christmas trees and lights. We buy presents and attend parties. We know how to prepare for Christmas...but do we know how to prepare for Christ? Someone is coming, John says. Someone powerful. Someone who will change our lives. Are we prepared?

The kind of preparation John is calling for doesn't ask us to do more during this season, but less. Or maybe it's a call to do what we do, but with a different focus. John's message is red and blue lights in the rear view mirror calling us to slow down, to pay attention. It's a call not to fall into the same holiday routines, which might numb us to the true joy of what's taking place. Do we get so caught up in mall traffic and wrapping paper and festive gatherings that we actually take away from the peace of the season rather than add to it? Are we contributing to the hope and joy Christ brings, or are we stumbling blocks? Are we ready for Jesus? What needs to be cleared out to prepare room?

One year when my family put up our Christmas tree, we decided to put it in a new spot in our family room. Making it fit meant moving some furniture around. When we moved my beloved recliner, I noticed that it was a little dirty under there: candy wrappers, fast-food bags, that one sock I had lost six years earlier, a LOT of stale popcorn. To make room for this new arrangement we had to do a little cleaning.

What do we need to clean out in order to make room? That's Mark's message to us right at the beginning of his gospel, a message we so easily miss: slow down, pay attention, look around. What needs around you aren't being met? What distractions are competing for your focus? I admit to being guilty of this every season. I get caught up in the gift exchanges and the holiday sales that I sometimes take my eye off the ball. I saw a commercial this weekend that talked about this being the season of "Thanks-getting." Part of me wants to stick my nose in the air and decry the blasphemy of such a statement, but another part of me admits, "I like getting things." And the more things I get, the more that accumulates in my life, the less room there is.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make room. Someone is coming! And this someone is a game-changer. This one is powerful, holy, the Messiah, the Anointed One. We are about to welcome a special guest into our midst who has the power to give us hope in a hopeless time, to ignite a fire in our souls, to fundamentally change our lives, to call us out of our wildernesses of violence and selfishness and divisiveness and greed into a Promised Land of peace and generosity and harmony and service. That's the kind of life we want to live, right? A life that combats the evil forces around us. A life that stands up to the power-hungry and greedy. A life that helps make this world a better place for our kids and grandkids. A world in which we feel safe, a world in which everyone is loved and fed, a world in which there is no fear. We want that world, right? Well, someone is coming who can help us make that world a reality. Are we prepared? Is there room?

For us, the preparation starts today. The season of Advent is about expectant and active waiting. We experience the anticipation of Advent when we turn around from our routines to pay attention to who's coming. We may have to give up some things, things that add to the stress and

take away from the joy. We may have to step out of our routine to see things from a new perspective. We may have to slow down and say “No.” We may have to look in the eye whatever it is that is causing us anxiety or fear and say a “defiant nevertheless,” that we believe in God’s promises in spite of our world’s circumstances. These preparations aren’t always easy. But someone is coming – someone is coming! – and I would hate to miss him because we were just too busy, we were unprepared, there wasn’t room. Where in your life, in your schedule, in your heart will you make room?

I’m kind of glad Mark doesn’t start with the birth of an eight-pound, six-ounce newborn baby Jesus. It’s such a familiar story to us that we might miss the deeper message. By starting with John the Baptist, Mark smacks us upside the head and says, “This season isn’t about all the things you think it’s about. It’s about being prepared.” Instead of a manger, Mark gives us the wilderness, reminding us that even when we are in dark and desolate places, there is a chance for a new beginning. Do you need a new beginning? Do you need a message of hope this season? Do you need to see a light shining in the darkness? Mark tells us that it’s coming, so we better get ready because we don’t want to miss it.

Are you prepared? Christmas seems to sneak up on us every year, doesn’t it? How many of us have said, “I can’t believe it’s already December!” But I’m not asking if you’re prepared for December. I’m not even asking if you’re prepared for Christmas. I’m not asking if you’ve started your Christmas shopping or baked all your cookies. I’m asking if you’re prepared for Christ. Christ is coming once again, bringing a message of hope and love and justice. There will be so many other things this holiday season demanding a place in your schedule, in your wallet, in your soul. Will Jesus come to us if we’re not prepared? Will we miss him and the message he brings? Will we wake up on Dec. 25 and feel the same as we did on Dec. 24? “Let every heart prepare him room.” Is there room?