

Sermon: The Gate to Bethlehem
Scripture: Mark 1:1-8
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: December 4, 2005

Here in Advent we begin at the beginning with the first of the four Gospels, the very first line. Mark ignites his story by using a little word that carried with it an explosive punch - “gospel”... “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” The word means “good news” or “glad tidings” and was in common usage in the day but primarily in the propaganda machine of the Roman State. News of a military victory or of the accession to power of a new emperor was trumpeted throughout the Roman Empire as gospel, glad tidings! To hear those words at the beginning would be to assume that you were about to hear of the military exploits of a great general or news of the emperor, who was hailed to be a divinized man. But Mark uses the term not to share news about Caesar but a peasant carpenter’s son born in Bethlehem and crucified as a thief on a cross. Glad tidings! What?

But then Mark goes even further in that first little sentence of his story because the term he uses for “the beginning” is the same one that was used in the Genesis account that starts “In the beginning”. So if Mark’s Roman citizens’ jaws were dropping at his equating Jesus with Caesar, then his Jewish listeners jaws were dropping because he was signaling that this was not just another story but was a part of THE story, you know the story of God and creation, God’s revelation and salvation – so he was equated, what, Jesus with God? And all of that in the phrase “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” With that sentence he’s saying “you know Caesar and Rome? Think bigger. Try the very foundation of creation itself. That’s what this good news relates to, the beginning of something on that order of things.

Then he goes on to say what this beginning looks like. It doesn't start with a mighty military assault and a great war. It doesn't begin with the ascension of a new emperor, nor with some earth shaking cataclysm or with down throw of mighty powers. For Mark it was much closer to home and far more intimate and subtle than that. The beginning of the Gospel of Mark wasn't even in the smallness of a stable in Bethlehem where a poor immigrant couple gave birth to a child – Jesus nativity - that was the starting point for Luke and Matthew. For Mark it was a smaller and subtler place than even that. He begins with a nativity of the human heart.

He speaks of the wild man, John the Baptist, out in the wilderness preparing the way for the Messiah, the Lord of history, by telling people to confess their sins and repent. “And people from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem,” Mark says “were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordon confessing their sins.”

That's the nativity scene, the origin scene in the Gospel of Mark – not the quiet babe in a manger on a silent and holy night but the rending of the human heart in contrition for sin and the tendency to betray what is true and good and right. That's what the penitential season of Advent is about – preparing the way for Christ to be born by way of repentance. That's the gateway to Christmas, as strange as that may sound. It's different from the jingle-belling, mall-hopping, tinsel-flinging, big plastic reindeer-inflating, too-much-stuff buying and gift wrapping time that our culture encourages and excites. Confession and repentance is rather less glamorous and glitzy than all that and hard to package and sell... but it's so much more important.

Man, has confession has hit the news this fall and a certain amount of repentance, it seems, from many powerful men behaving badly, but their confessions begin with being outed by their victims rather than an honest

facing of their own sinfulness and making amends. Still if some of them are truly as regretful and repentant as they say they are, then welcome to Advent the penitential season and I pray they might be transformed by their fall. But their being humbled, as they rightly should be, does not let us off the hook, for our journey through the Advent gateway to Christmas must traverse the same territory for love of the kind that Christmas speaks breaks open corners of our lives that we'd prefer not see the light of day.

For we too have misused our power and hurt others and neglected what was necessary and placed people on pedestals where they didn't belong. We too have been unaware of darker motives operating beneath our easy facade and we too have refused to acknowledge our selfishness or honor another's dignity as we should have. Haven't we? Or is it just me?

Well, if Mark is right and repentance is the gateway to Christmas then we have our Advent challenge laid out clearly before us, thanks a lot Mark! We begin out in the wilderness – or in the wilderness in here - confess our sins, repent and, as Step 9 of the AA 12-step program suggests, we make amends. That is the way to Christmas.

So is there a situation in your life that is festering, a relationship that is chaffing, a person that might be hurting because of something you said or did or left undone? What's the sin in your life right now that needs confessing? If you are having trouble locating a juicy one then I suggest a good tool to use to bring to mind where some of those sore spots in your soul – cause that's what confession is about, it's not about shaming and feeling bad about ourselves, it's about healing and reconciling. So the tool I suggest using to become conscious of the sin is, believe it or not, the 7 deadly sins – pride, anger, greed, gluttony, sloth, lust, envy. As you pray and enter into a time of confession before God – cause remember as

Protestants we don't go to a priest for confession, we go directly to God – you prayerfully search your heart with each one of the “deadly sins” and if you do it honestly then likely you'll find you're the sore spot revealed. Take anger, for instance - has your anger of late been honest or have there been those around you who have unfairly bore the brunt of an anger fueled by other things in your life. Does your fury at the check-out person really belong to them or to the guy that cut you off in traffic? Or take pride - has your pride placed you in a position where you have had trouble seeing your own honest part in a conflict or led you to lash out at someone who made you feel less-than? Or lust - have you used someone lately to satisfy your own needs and cravings with little reference to what they need or want? Gluttony, greed, envy, sloth. Prayerfully holding each before you can reveal those sore spots on the heart, the sins that just make you feel not-so-at-ease, that you tuck to back of your mind because they are uncomfortable to consider... those are the Advent stepping stones to Christmas, that rive the human heart and prepare us for what is coming.

For the best approach to the Christ Child in the manger, is to feel something of the weight of our own regret and our own brokenness drawing us downward on bended knee. The riven human heart is the access point to the savior. We must feel the weight of our own loss of innocence and our feeble defensiveness, our own crafty capacity to deceive ourselves and others and our own rivalrous jockeying for position. None of us are free of these and all of us can recognize ourselves through our own choices at times barred at the gateway and walled off from what the Christ Child, Love Incarnate, demands of us and invites us into.

But the gospel, the good news, is that through the gateway of confession and repentance, a way that can be narrow and harrowing at times,

lies Love Incarnate and Love's Mother receiving you in, no matter your sin, saying something beautiful and gracious and forgiving, saying as the choir will soon sing - "hush my dear, lie still and slumber, holy angels guard thy bed! Heavenly blessings without number gently falling on you head."

That's what awaits us, through the gateway of confession, repentance and making amends, the grace and peace of a God of Love... "may you live to know and fear him, trust and love him all your days, then you'll go dwell forever with him, see his face and sing his praise." Amen.