



HOLIDAY HOME TOUR

★ CHRISTMAS IN ALL FOUR GOSPELS ★

Christmas at Mark's House

Mark 1:9-13

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

November 27, 2022

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

Nothing amplifies differences in tradition quite like the holidays.

When I was growing up, Christmas at my house meant new Christmas pajamas, every year, and everyone would wear them on Christmas Eve and then lounge around in them all morning. There would be coffee and hot chocolate and stockings and egg casserole, the enjoyment of gifts and a walk with the dog, a nap and some cookies — all of this still in our pajamas, because Christmas at my house growing up meant pajamas for as long as possible, usually well into the afternoon.

Just through the afternoon, though, because the evening was reserved for Christmas at my grandparents' house. My dad's side of the family would gather and there would be honey baked ham, spritz cookies as far as the eye could see (those were my grandmother's favorites), and there would be a grown ups table upstairs and a kids table downstairs. And all of this was enjoyed in dresses and tights and shiny shoes, shirts pressed and pants pleated, with hair combed or curled, because if Christmas at my house was relaxed, Christmas at my grandparents' house was fancy.

Here's the thing about that: both were great. I have treasured memories of Christmas at my house and Christmas at my grandparents' house. One isn't better than the other — they're just different. Christmas in the four gospels is the same way. Four gospels, four stories of Christmas. Each of them celebrates in their own way. One isn't better than the other — they're just different.

So this Advent, as we prepare to tell our own story of Christmas, we're going on a bit of a holiday home tour. And maybe, along the way, we'll learn something about what kind of celebration each of really needs this year. We'll visit Mark's house — Mark is too busy to decorate, but he understands the true meaning of the season. At Matthew's house, we might get lost in the crowd — his house is overflowing with family and friends. You can't miss John's house — he has a particular fondness for Christmas lights of every sort. And when we finally get to Luke's house — Luke has the best music playing in the background, but his furniture choices are interesting at best. We'll visit their houses in turn. We'll experience four different ways to welcome Christmas, four different approaches to celebrating the one who comes in flesh, love wrapped up in a body, to meet us right where we are.¹

Mark is the first stop on the tour, and no one would fault you for thinking maybe the poor guy just hadn't had enough time to get ready, being first in line and all. It doesn't actually seem to be Christmas at all. Mark's gospel house has no wreath on the door, no lights on the tree — heck, there isn't even a tree, and you

know that the moment you arrive, because you can see every corner of the place the minute you step inside. His house is functional — a roof over his head and four walls to hold it up, and that's about it. And you sure won't find any shepherds milling about, and no shepherds means no sheep, and how could there be, because there's no star for them to follow. You won't even find Mary and Joseph, anxious and exhausted new parents, because — here's the real kicker — you also won't find a baby.

There's not a single sign of Christmas at Mark's house. It seems just like any other day, nothing special about it. But do not mistake Evangelist Mark for Ebenezer Scrooge. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation, the good news that God chose to take on flesh and step into human history and change life as we know it. Mark may not offer us any details about where Jesus was born, but he tells us everything we need to know about where we can find him. Mark can tell you exactly where the love of God can be found in this world.

The first glimpse we see of Jesus in Mark's gospel is the day of his baptism. He comes up from the water and the Spirit of God falls down upon him. He hears the voice of God calling him Son, beloved. It's a good moment, but it's fleeting. Immediately, the gospel tells us, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. Now, if you are liturgically minded, you might be thinking, we go into the wilderness during Lent, not during Advent. But this is Mark's story, and this is how he tells it.

Advent means "arrival," and according to Mark, immediately upon arrival, Jesus is in the wilderness. And wilderness, at least when it comes to scripture, is never just about geography. It's not a place on the map. It's a condition of the heart, an ache of the soul. Wilderness is where everything uncertain emerges front and center. It's where you can't make it on your own, where the way of God feels feeble and frail or even foolish, and other voices start to sound reasonable. The wilderness is anywhere that disappointment is fresh, anywhere your spirit feels like it is caught in a storm, and sometimes you can't help but wonder if God is really paying attention, or not. You won't find this kind of wilderness on a map. But you might find it at home, or at work, or sometimes even at church. Because the wilderness is never all that far away.

Mark knows this. Mark never forgets this, and he does his absolute best to make sure we never forget it, either. From the beginning of his gospel right up until the end, Jesus is in the wilderness. He battles demons and storms. He pushes back against systems that oppress. He feeds the hungry and heals the sick and casts out powers that try to dehumanize us. His ministry starts in the wilderness and it ends there, too, up on a cross, his blood spilled out upon wilderness ground. Mark doesn't spend any time telling us where Jesus was born, but he tells us over and over again where Jesus can be found — in the wilderness. And that matters because Mark knows we often find ourselves in the wilderness, too.

Mark's house is small, and simple, and it's not decorated because he doesn't spend much time there. He's on the move, always, chasing Jesus with this incredible sense of urgency. Mark uses the word "immediately" 41 times in his 16 chapters, whereas the other three gospels combined use it a total of nine times. Mark's gospel has no time to fuss around because when your heart is bruised and broken, your need for Jesus is immediate.

There's no manger in Mark's gospel because Jesus isn't in the manger. He's in the center of town, where powers and principalities meet and people's lives hang in the balance. He's in the neighborhoods with manicured lawns, where people of all ages exhaust themselves chasing after some unachievable understanding of success. He's in the neighborhoods where lawns are an afterthought, where people of all ages worry more about safety than anything else. He's in dorm rooms and college libraries, in the midst of all-nighters, awake with you in those lonely hours when you're trying to figure out who you want to be. He's in hospital rooms and jail cells, where nightmares don't fade into the morning light. He's in quiet houses and empty bedrooms, where grief-filled tears can be heard on nights that are far too silent. He's in places like Club Q in Colorado Springs, where what should be sanctuary becomes yet another place where terror leaves its

terrible mark. As far as Mark's concerned, we don't really need to know where Jesus was born. We just need to know where he can be found. And Jesus will always be found wherever he's needed most.

Mark's house is the place that no one wants to visit, but it's important we know it's there. I hope you won't need the Christmas story the way Mark tells it. I hope your holidays are merry and bright. I hope the worst thing that happens for you is that you end up with a stomach ache after eating too many cookies. But if that's not the case — Mark's house is there, and the door is always open.

Because Christmas can be hard. It's supposed to be the wonderful time of the year, full of joy, and light, and warmth. But that expectation serves only to magnify days that are filled with other things — fear, pain, loneliness, or grief. That's when we need to visit Mark. Because I know that some of you just celebrated Thanksgiving with an empty place at the table. And I know that some of you are wondering how to pay the bills, and some of you are trying to figure out where you fit in. I know that some of you are struggling with faith and trying to make sense of such a broken world. I know that some of you are exhausted, and some of you are lonely as all get-out, and some of you would just really like to catch a break. There is room for you at Mark's house. You will not be alone, and might even find some reason for hope, because there's one other thing about Christmas with Mark.²

When Jesus was in the wilderness, the gospel says "he was with the wild beasts." No one else, no other gospel, ever makes mention of that. But you know what it is, don't you? It's all the reason we need to light to candle of hope today. Mark doesn't pull out any Advent candles himself, of course he doesn't, but he doesn't forget the promise of the old prophet Isaiah — the one who gave us the beautiful words we remember this time of year, of a day when "the wolf shall live with the lamb; and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the lion will feed together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; and no one will hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." Those words are a metaphor for God's promised day, when everything wrong will be made right. Jesus goes into the wilderness, as God's holy love made flesh, and in that wilderness, signs of God's promised day show up.

It turns out, there's a little bit of Christmas at Mark's house after all. It's a gathering of those who know what it is to struggle, and there, in the midst of them, Jesus appears. You won't see it in lights and garland. You won't hear it in carols by the fire. But everywhere you look, you'll still somehow see that the love of God has come to live where you live.

¹ The idea of a "Home Tour" has been preached by various pastors. As best I can tell, the idea originated with Rev. Jon Walton, Pastor Emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City.

² I am deeply indebted to my friend and colleague, Rev. Tom Are of Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, for the trajectory of this sermon, most especially the turn toward the wild beasts and the prophet Isaiah. That connection is entirely his.