

Christmas at Mark's House

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Isaiah 61:1-2

Mark 1:1-11

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"

~ Mark 1:1

Prayer

We give you thanks, O God, for the story of Christmas.

As we prepare to celebrate the miracle of Bethlehem once again,

Be our companion on our journey to the manger.

May the words of the Evangelists inspire us

To offer up our hearts and our whole selves to Christ, your Son,

Our Sibling, Lord and Savior. Amen.

I spent my first Christmas in the United States in Texas. I met the couple that opened the doors of their home to me the year before I came to seminary. I was doing some volunteer work in a Baptist Church in Quilmes, a suburb of Buenos Aires, and the Texan couple had gone down to Argentina on a mission trip organized by their congregation. We kept in touch, and they were thrilled when they heard that I was attending seminary in the States. As soon as they could, they flew east to see me, and they insisted that I should stay in the U.S. to experience an authentic American Christmas with their family. So rather than flying south during the holiday break, I got on a flight to Dallas.

My host family lived in an affluent town, north of Dallas, on the edge of a golf course. All the houses on their street were huge McMansions. At night, people from all over would drive through the neighborhood to see the elegant Christmas lights and expensive decorations on the front lawn of the imposing houses. Coming from a household where Christmas was just like any other day of the year. This is what my mother used to say every time I wondered why she did not put up a Christmas tree and hang Christmas lights like our neighbors did. My mother's answer was always the same and my brother and I had it memorized, "***Christmas is just like any other day of the year. What counts is the spirit of the season not the decorations or gifts.***" I was mesmerized by the 8-foot-tall fully decorated Christmas tree surrounded by piles of gifts in the family room at my host family's house. There was a large wreath over the fireplace and a cascading garland with lights that draped the mantelshelf in the spacious living room. Next to the fireplace, the couple set up a crèche without the Christ Child, which the wife had inherited from her grandparents. On Christmas morning, the couple's grandchildren had a lot of fun running

around the house in search of the baby Jesus so he could be placed in his rightful place in the nativity scene.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, snow flurries began to fall while we were having breakfast. Everyone ran outside. One of the grandkids grabbed my hand, yanked me from my chair and dragged me to the back yard where the whole family was jumping and dancing around. Some stuck their tongues out to catch the snowflakes. They all started singing "*Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow.*" By mid-morning, the snow was gone but my hosts were excited that I could see snowflakes so close to Christmas Day. Despite living in Texas, they still dreamed of a white Christmas. Late that night, we went to church. Before we left the house, one of the couple's daughters told me that for her Christmas only arrived after she held a lit candle in the dark sanctuary and sang "*Silent Night.*" I was surprised to learn that they sang the same carol and lit candles every year at the Christmas Eve service. In Brazil, I had not attended two Christmas Eve services that were exactly same. What mattered most was the story and its meaning for the Church and the world rather than the carols, music, candles or the liturgy.

On Christmas Day, I learned a few important lessons. Never drink two mugfuls of eggnog before your host family gathers to unwrap the gifts. Everyone was waiting for me, and I could not leave the bathroom for what felt like an embarrassingly long time.

The English language can create awkward situations in a family gathering where you are a guest who learned English as a second language. While we were at the breakfast table on Christmas Day, the couple's youngest daughter, who was in her early twenties, overslept. Everybody was impatiently waiting for her to come downstairs, so I very politely offered to go upstairs and knock her up. The moment those words came out of my mouth, I knew I had said something inappropriate. The whole kitchen fell silent. People glanced at each other as if trying to decide who would explain the meaning of my words in American English. Finally, one of the sons-in-law broke the silence and told me why my choice of words caught everyone off guard. I was mortified. Everyone else laughed.

After having a hearty Christmas breakfast, the family gathered in the family room. Someone had already separated the gifts that were underneath and around the Christmas tree by names. We sat down next to our stack of Christmas gifts, and we went around the circle, opening one gift at a time. There was a lot of "thank-yous," smiles, wows, hugs and laughter as the presents were taken out of the boxes and shown to the people in the circle. I had never received so many Christmas gifts before, and I have not gotten as many since that day. I was a bit self-conscious that I only had a small gift for the couple I met in Argentina. I gave them a music box with their names engraved on it along with the words "*thank you for your kindness*" in Portuguese. They opened the music box immediately and while it played "*Clair de Lune*" by Claude Debussy, one of my favorite pieces, the couple hugged me, and they reminded me that it was the gift at the heart of the Christmas story that brought us together even though we came from different parts of the world.

For almost two millennia, Christmas, this story about God becoming human and living amongst us in the Child of Mary, has brought followers of Jesus of Nazareth from every language, culture, ethnicity, nationality, and continent together to celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation. Over the centuries, the Church thought that it would be best if we all had one consistent harmonious Christmas story to shape our collective understanding of the birth and life of Jesus. When we tell or hear the Christmas story, we seldom ask ourselves why the story is told not by one single evangelist, but by four different writers who bring to the story their own point of view, their own style, their own material, their own voice, their own theology and their own traditions. If I had returned to Brazil immediately after spending Christmas with my host family in Texas, I would have gone away with the impression that what I experienced in the wealthy suburb of Dallas was a typical American Christmas, but because I have spent many other Christmases here, in different parts of the country, in different churches, both as a guest and a friend at different homes and gatherings, I know that every single one of us decorates for Christmas in a slightly different fashion, cherishes unique family, cultural and religious traditions, and celebrates the birth of Christ in a quite personal manner. It is fascinating that our Christian ancestors believed that it would be important for the Church to listen to a multiplicity of storytellers so we might begin to grasp the meaning of Christmas. The early Christians did not seek to harmonize the stories told by Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. They left the differences intact, undoubtedly hoping that this strange world of the Gospels with their evocative and singular stories about the Son of God, miraculous pregnancies, choirs of angels, shepherds in the fields, a holy Child in a feedbox, a mysterious star and wisemen from the east might keep stretching our imagination, enlarging our hearts, deepening our faith, strengthening our desire to learn more about God's love revealed in Christ, and inspiring us to engage with the story until the story begins to change us from the inside out, until Christmas becomes the Good News, the Gospel that transforms how we live.

In the New Testament, there is not one, but four very different Christmas stories and Mark begins his version of the story with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The Gospel writer believes that the Good News about Jesus' whole life takes on flesh and blood when Jesus hears God's voice after his baptism, "***You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.***" This is where the rubber hits the road for Mark. This is where Jesus claims his identity as the Child of God and embraces his call as the One sent to bring "***Good News to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and to comfort those who mourn.***" This is where Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit. It is from the bank of the river Jordan while his body was still dripping with baptismal water that Jesus is led to the emptiness of the wilderness where his faith, identity, understanding of Scriptures and faithfulness to God are tested. After 40 days, Jesus returns to Galilee and starts to announce the Good News of God's reign openly to the people of Israel under Roman occupation.

Matthew, a little later, looked at what Mark had written and decided to take his readers farther back into the past. Matthew wanted the early Christians to remember that

Jesus' story had its beginning when he was born to Mary in Bethlehem and was adopted into Joseph's family and royal lineage. It is Matthew that tells that part of the story about the magi who brought gifts to the newborn king. For the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, this is where the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins.

Then Luke came along around the same time Matthew was still writing and said that Jesus' story actually began when an angel appeared to Mary in Galilee and invited her to become the surrogate mother for God's Son. And Joseph had to take his pregnant fiancée to Bethlehem because of the imperial census decreed by Caesar Augustus. While they were in Joseph's ancestral home, Jesus was born and shepherds came to the house where Mary and Joseph were staying and found the little Christ Child lying on the manger.

Much later, John insisted that Mark, Matthew and Luke had not gone back far enough. The writer of the fourth Gospel declared that the beginning of Jesus' story begins before there was anything, before time and space, before the Earth itself was created. ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word as with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... And the Word became flesh and lived among us."***ⁱ According to John, this is where the Good News of Jesus Christ really begins.

Good News. Gospel. As far as we know, Mark was the first of the writings in the New Testament the Christian community called "Gospel." The writer of this book about Jesus was also the first one to say that what he was putting into words was/is Good News. Mark did not invent this word, he borrowed it from the Greco-Roman world. At the time Mark was writing, the word translated as "gospel" referred to any major good news. Oftentimes though, it was used in the context of war when a messenger returned from the battlefield to announce the good news of military victory and triumph. Shortly before the time of Jesus, an official imperial inscription hailed Caesar Augustus as "son of god" and declared his birthday as *"a beginning of good news or gospel for the world."* In a quiet and subversive move, Mark co-opted the word "gospel" to describe the life, faith, teachings, death and resurrection of the young Jewish religious teacher that Rome nailed to the cross. In his writing, Mark makes the bold proclamation that it is this humble teacher and healer from Nazareth who God declared to be God's beloved Child that is the beginning of life-saving and world-transforming Good News for humanity, not the emperor with his wealth and powerful military.

During this season of Advent, we are going to spend Christmas with each one of the Gospel writers to see how they decorate their homes for the Good News of Jesus Christ, what traditions they treasure, and how they tell and celebrate the story that is at the core of our faith tradition. And Mark, as hard as it is for me to say it, sides with my mother. His house has no tree, no candles at the windows, no wreath at the front door, no stockings hanging from the mantel and no nativity set in sight. For the first evangelist who dared to use the word "gospel" to talk about Jesus of Nazareth, it is enough to affirm that Jesus is the ***"Son of God."*** Instead of writing about Gabriel's visit to Mary, the little town of

Bethlehem or the philosophical contrast between light and darkness to prove that Jesus is God's Word in human flesh, Mark focuses on what he considers to be the most powerful and convincing evidence that Jesus is God's Beloved Child: Jesus' willingness to give his life for the sake of a world of peace, justice, love, and hope. For the writer of the Gospel of Mark less is better. The bareness of his house reflects Mark's conviction that there would be nothing to celebrate about Jesus' birth without the cross and the resurrection, without the events of Holy Week and Easter morning, without the horror of the crucifixion, the deafening silence of holy Saturday and the shocking surprise of the empty tomb, without God's power to bring hope out of despair, joy out of sadness, and new life out of suffering and death. Mark reminds us that the Good news of the Gospel is not found only in the birth of a child but especially in the man that child grew up to be.

At the end of Mark's Gospel, it is a centurion, Rome's chief representative at the site of the crucifixion, the person who stood for Rome's law and might, that looks at Jesus' dead body still hanging on the cross and declares, "***Truly, this man was God's Son.***"ⁱⁱ The centurion is the first human being to proclaim the words Jesus heard at his baptism. In Mark's house, the birth stories are mostly a distraction because what matters is what happens on the cross and at the cemetery on Easter morning. It is there at the foot of the cross and at the empty tomb, not at the manger, that we finally realize who Jesus is and that God is indeed with us at all times and in all places. We are never without hope!

In the lack of Christmas decor at Mark's house, we learn to look at the whole story of Jesus and see that the Christian hope is not in the cradle but in the cross. Ours is the hope that persists through loss, grief, pain, illness, loneliness, shootings, wars, and even death because in the story of Jesus, God gives us the kind of hope that has been through the crucifixion and the tomb and still emerges on the other side undefeated and undiminished. And that's Gospel! Good News!

Now that Thanksgiving is behind us, we are all taking out our Christmas decorations, shopping for gifts, and planning once again to go through all those family and church traditions that make us feel that Christmas has arrived and that Christmas can be the most wonderful time of the year. And that is all very good. I myself have already set up my own little pre-lit tabletop Christmas tree and wrapped lights around the stair railing and put the Advent candles on the Advent ring and, this afternoon, I am planning to buy a wreath for my front door. We all should rejoice with heart and soul in the story of Christmas, in the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. But our visit to Mark's house this morning reminds us not to let ourselves be distracted by the lights, the decorations, the cooking, the gifts, the carols or the Christmas pageants. Mark invites us to remember why the birth of this Holy Child matters; why Christ offers us hope for a new life even in the most difficult moments and in the darkest places. The emptiness of Mark's house reminds us that Christmas does not happen only once a year. The Good News of Jesus Christ happens daily as we allow his birth, his teachings, his life, his death, and his resurrection transform us and move us a little closer to God and to one another each day. This is the Good News! This is how the Gospel story becomes real in our lives.

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

May the Christmas story transform all of us as we visit the houses of the Gospel writers during this Advent season.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ John 1:1-3, 14a.

ⁱⁱ Mark 15:39.