

December 13, 2015 “Christmas: Where Is It?” Mark 1:1-8

Because we live in these times we cannot pass through advent, we cannot prepare for the celebration of the Christ Feast without taking time to note the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark. There are theologians and authors who are highly critical of the Gospel of Mark and the other Gospels for what is not found here. The fact is we look in vain for the details of Jesus' birth mentioned in such detail in Matthew, who tells us the story of the journey of the Wise Men, and Luke he tells us so much detail (remember Luke is a physician) about Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Jesus. It is Luke who tells us about the Shepherds and the Angelic chorus. And the marvelous thing is Luke sets those hard-for-some-people-to-believe-stories in the setting of real history, with a crude but genuine time line.

Mark just skips over all of that. It is as though he had no interest in Jesus' infancy or his youth. Fact #1: Mark is not interested in the details of where Jesus was born, or how that happened, or the wonders associated with the nativity. But that does not mean the birth of Jesus as documented by the others...Matthew and Luke...that does not mean those accounts are unreliable. It does mean that Mark's interest lies elsewhere. Mark was the youngest and the earliest to set down an account of what we Christians call the good news. With a young person's thirst for the now, he tells what he is convinced is the heart of the matter...Jesus' ministry...Jesus' divinity as it shines forth in the miracle stories...and depending on how you weigh out the material...one half to one third of his account focuses on the final week of Jesus' life and the reality of the crucifixion on Friday, and the resurrection on Sunday morning.

So the real question we have to bring to the Gospel of Mark is this one. Is there anything here that contradicts the details we find in Matthew and Luke. And the frank answer, the honest answer is no. In fact Mark tells us a number of things in the first 8 verses of his account that are in keeping with the spirit of the birth accounts which Matthew and Luke present.

The easiest example of that is found in the first 2 lines of Mark's account. “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophets...” There are actually 3 things in those few words that speak to the dependability of all the Gospel accounts. Mark says first of all I am going to tell you the truth about Jesus here at the beginning. And it is good news! It is interesting to notice that the modern translations and the King James Version are word for word identical at this point. There is no clearer way to say what Mark communicates at this point. Here is the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

- No less an authority than the Oxford Dictionary offers these definitions of the word Gospel.
1. Glad tidings preached by Christ.
 2. Record of Christ's life and teaching in the first 4 books of the New Testament (and then it names them...Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).
 3. Thing that may safely be believed. (Interesting eh?)
 4. Oath sworn on the Gospels.
 5. Truth.
- Why I mention these definitions is this...The Oxford Dictionary is not a theological book. It does bear testimony to what words mean and have consistently meant down through the lifetime of our language. That means an impartial judge would tell you Mark's Gospel contains the glad tidings or good news preached by Jesus, it is an accurate record of Jesus' life. It is safe to believe what you find here. It contains the truth. And within that larger statement...I share with you...no birth stories. No Bethlehem details. Mark starts his account with the opening of Jesus' ministry in his 30th year, which he or Peter his uncle actually saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears.

Second point in that first line is not a recording of Jesus' name but rather his name and his

title in the believing community we call the church. He says I am telling you the truth about Jesus Christ. Mark affirms in the 8th word of his account...in other words at the very beginning...that Jesus is the Messiah for whom Mark as a young Jew, Israel as a Jewish nation, has been expecting for a long, long time. Totally in line with the affirmations of the Gospel writers who would set down other accounts in the following years. Matthew and Luke and John. Jesus is the Christ. Matthew included the birth details that he records because he wanted his people, the Jews to take note, the Messiah has come and is none other than Jesus. Luke wants us to know that even the place Jesus was born fits the profile the prophets of Israel have spelled out for the one who was to come.

Mark is about to introduce us to the details of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. He wants us to know that none other than the great prophet Isaiah foretold John the baptist's ministry as the coming of the messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah. That that is what John the Baptist is about. Introducing the Christ to the world at the Jordan River...none other than Jesus. It is significant. This account which does not tell us about the star or the shepherds or the wise men or the census (an historical fact) that was the reason for Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem; this account begins by imbedding the story of Jesus the Messiah in a context of fulfilled prophecy from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is the Christ! A detail at the heart of Christmas.

You know it has only been the last part of the 20th century that has seriously tried to reduce Jesus to the category of "an ordinary man": a gifted teacher who was born and who died. In the 20th century we started to see scholars setting aside the matter of the resurrection because it seemed to require not only faith but too much faith. Faith that takes God seriously.

Well, look at the opening line of Mark's Gospel."The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark means it when he says Jesus is the Son of God. He is saying, just a matter of a few years, possibly as little as 2 years after the resurrection occurred that Jesus is divine. That Jesus is God. That you cannot separate the God of the Old Testament for this man who preached the good news about God's Kingdom and was crucified and who rose from the dead on the 3rd day. And by the way, while Mark does not tell us about the angel chorus singing Jesus arrival song to the shepherds of Bethlehem, he has no problem whatsoever telling us that angels proclaimed Jesus rose from the dead on morning of the 3rd day following his death and burial.

Does Mark contradict the gospels of Matthew and Luke in their telling of the birth stories. No he does not. In fact he opens his account by telling what later church councils would affirm, that Jesus is the Son of God, divine. That the power of Jesus healing miracles is the power of God touching the real lives of common ordinary and yes, sinful people through this real man Jesus. Does that involve a mystery? Yes it does. And the mystery is the mystery of God coming to dwell in the midst of the conquered Jews of Israel, in the time of the Roman Empire, in real time, in real places, witnessed by people like Mark and Luke and John and Matthew and Mark's uncle Peter, who happens to be one of Mark's chief sources for episodes in the ministry of Jesus that Mark did not witness himself.

What else does Mark tell us? Well, he tells us God sends people as messengers, not only angels. There was John the Baptist. There were the 12 disciples who became apostles, students who graduated and were sent out to spread the word and did so effectively. In fact God sent Mark out too. Not only to write this first account down for us, people who treasure written accounts, old accounts, accounts you can verify, that mention people you can prove were there like Pontius Pilate. Mark is also a messenger sent by God telling us about Jesus the Messiah, who is the very Son of God Himself.

In fact the major significance of Mark's telling us about John the Baptist is to tell us that

John the Baptist said, "After me will come one who is much more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I (John the Baptist), I baptize you water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." And it is the literal meaning of those words to say John the Baptist proclaimed, Jesus will baptize you with the Spirit of the Living God, because He is the Son of God. That is Mark's testimony. The words of the prophets have been fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. The argument that the church invented the Trinity is a lie. If anyone invented it Mark did in telling us his account of Jesus. But then, Mark was really impressed by what he saw Jesus do, and heard Jesus say.

As a committed Christian preacher, I want you to remember it is a legitimate question to raise. The Christmas story: where is it in the Gospel of Mark? It is not part of his account. But if we are seekers of the truth we must immediately add...Mark however says nothing that would contradict the birth stories of Matthew and Luke. Furthermore he says much that underlines the dependability of their accounts of Jesus birth, His life, His ministry, His death and His resurrection.

Glory to God in the Highest. He has sent His Son into the world to redeem it from sin, and to save us from our mortality. And He has poured out His Holy Spirit on those who recognize these facts.

Let us pray;

Lord God Almighty, we give thanks for the dependability of your sacred word. We give thanks that is safe to believe what you have revealed, and what you have done for us. Receive our praise and fill our celebrations at this time of year as we recognize your coming, born in Bethlehem, recognized by the Magi and the shepherds, serenaded by angel choruses. Amen