

TEXT: Mark 1:1-8
THEME: The gospel is revolutionary
SUBJECT: Interior revolution
TITLE: The Heart's Transformation

Second Sunday of Advent
06 December 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of the heart's transformation.”
(Hart's translation of Mark 1:4)

The Gospel according to Mark does not begin with angels whispering in Mary's ear. No shepherds keep watch over their flocks by night, no wise men from the East follow a star, no big-eyed animals stand around a straw-stuffed manger.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with nativity stories. Matthew tells the story from the perspective of Joseph; Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary. Matthew has wise men coming, not to the manger, but to Joseph's house in Nazareth some time after the birth of Jesus. Luke follows startled shepherds to the manger behind the lodge in Bethlehem.

Mark's gospel begins, is birthed, in the wilderness. The wilderness is not hospitable to new borns and their mothers; it is a hostile and uninhabitable wasteland. To be banished into the wilderness, as was Cain, is to have one's life put in danger.

Life in the wilderness is literally an existence unbearable for humans. Metaphorically, it is an existence exiled from the presence of God. The wilderness in first century Palestine, as in many successive times and places, was viewed with considerable horror and fear.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus, according to Mark, arises not from a fertile womb but from a barren wasteland. Ever wonder why we celebrate the birth narratives as the beginning of the story of Jesus and not his appearance in the wilderness to be baptized by a mad prophet ranting and raving about the heart's transformation? While birth marks the beginning of a life, baptism marks the beginning of the Christian way of life.

Thomas Merton observed that given a choice between the womb and the wilderness, between the warm swaddling blanket enfolding an infant in a cradle and the harsh, hidden agony of solitude and silence, we choose the womb over the wilderness every time.

The Gospel according to John begins before the beginning, before creation, before time and space. “In the beginning,” says John, “was the Logos,” an untranslatable term usually translated “word.” The first eighteen verses of John's Gospel is poetry of the highest caliber.

Mark is having none of it. Mark is having none of Matthew and Luke's infant nursed at Mary's breast. Mark insists the good news of Jesus begins in the wilderness where we cannot remain comfortably at rest with our more or less illusory ideas of God.

The word translated “beginning” (*arche*) in Mark’s opening verse is a reference to Genesis 1: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” Mark wants us to know that God is beginning again, not with God’s breath hovering over the waters of creation, but with God’s spirit transforming hearts through the waters of baptism.

With the wilderness setting for this baptism, Mark is saying that the new order of the kingdom of God does not arise from within the existing power relationships but quite independently of them at the margins of society. Geography is often theology disguised. The wilderness, symbolic of the wasteland, a barren land, is set in spatial tension with the temple, thought to be the center of God’s creative activity.

According to the dominant nationalist ideology of first century Israel, Jerusalem was considered the hub of the world to which all the nations would one day pay homage. When Mark says all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem seek John in the wilderness, he turns this nationalist ideology on its head. Far from embarking on a pilgrimage to Zion, the crowds flee to the wilderness. It is as if the people marched, not on Washington, DC, but into the Mojave Desert.

Rowan Williams observes that the church is always renewed from the edges rather than from the center. There is a limit to what institutional church can do. Institutions have their own dynamic and their own problems, and renewal tends not to come from central planning. (It would be interesting to study how many synod resolutions effected renewal in the church.) It was St Francis who went to Pope Innocent III, not the other way around.

In the beginning. The events recounted in the entire Gospel of Mark constitute only “the beginning” of the good news. The narrative as a whole is open-ended. The story continues to be written in our lives. On the other hand, the life and work of Jesus must also have a particular beginning which, for Mark, is baptism in the desert.

In the beginning. We rightly celebrate the birth of a child and rightly remember that birth yearly. Who doesn’t like a birthday party, at least until you turn 40? The image of mother Mary nursing baby Jesus warms the heart.

We do not give life to ourselves and our lives, for many years, are dependent on the care of others. Birth marks the beginning of a long period of maturation in which our hearts are formed in the image and likeness of our parents, our family, our ancestors, our race, our tribe.

In the beginning. Baptism marks the beginning of a lifetime of maturation in which our hearts are continually transformed into the image and likeness of God embodied in the person of Jesus. Baptism sets us on a path that will lead us into the wilderness of temptation, forcing us to choose between conflicting loyalties. Baptism means loyalty to family, ancestors, friends, race, nation, are transcended by loyalty to the commonwealth of God.

As heart warming as birth narratives are, as miraculous as the gift of life is, the voice crying in the wilderness invites us to become a part of a larger narrative, a narrative marked by an even greater miracle, the miracle of a transformed heart, a heart that lets go of lesser loyalties to embrace loyalty to God alone and to the ways of God in the world.

We have to ask: Do we really want to let go of the things we find comforting, that promise us security, that give us some standing in the world, for loyalty to God alone? According to Mark, all the people living in Jerusalem and all the people living in the Judean suburbs wanted such a life. That may be the hardest thing to believe about this story.

Mathew Kelly believes our dirty little secret is that we don't actually want our lives to be transformed. We are comfortable with who we are and where we are, and we don't want God all up in our business moving things around, turning things upside down. We want to be Christians, at least some of the time, and we want to be seen as good and caring.

But a faith that demands an interior revolution of one's whole self and a reorientation of one's existence? A faith that demands being completely transformed into a "chosen kindred, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people held in peculiar possession, so that we may openly proclaim the virtues of the one who called us out of darkness into his wondrous light . . . who are now the people of God" (1 Peter 2:9)?

Wilderness or womb: wherever the gospel beings, it ends in the heart's transformation. A voice cries in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Can I get back to you on that?

PRAYER: by Walter Brueggemann

You are the God from whom no secret is hid,
and we are a people with many secrets,
 that we want to tell for the sake of our lives,
 that we dare not tell because they are deep and painful.

But they are our secrets . . . and they count for much;
 they are our truth . . . rooted deep in our lives.

You are the God of all truth,
and now we bid you heed our truth,
about which we will not bear false witness . . .

 The truth of grief unresolved,
 the truth of pain unacknowledged,
 the truth of fear too child-like,
 the truth of hate, as powerful as it is deep,
 the truth of being taken advantage of,
 and being used,
 and manipulated,
 and slandered.

We trust the great truth of your wondrous love,
 but we will not sit still for it,
 UNTIL you hear us.

Our truth—heard by you—will make us free.
So be the God of all truth, even ours,
 we pray in the name of Jesus,
 who is your best kept secret of hurt. Amen.