

Advent 2-December 10, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Mark 1:1-8

"In the Beginning...The Voice

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

I love nativity scenes. Our house is now decorated for Christmas and there are several different nativity sets throughout our house reminding us of where Christmas began. While we have several nativity scenes, I haven't seen a house decorated with more nativity sets than what my sister has on display everywhere in her house. There are large sets, small sets, modern art sets, traditional sets, and sets made of wood, plastic, and delicate ceramics. I remember each year as I was growing up, there was a simple nativity set with a wood manger with grass glued onto the roof and all people and animals were made of rubber, so nothing ever was broken by my playing with it. I remember rearranging the characters in peculiar ways and waiting for my mother to notice and put them back where Luke, the author of the Christmas story, told us where everything was on the first Silent Night.

In this new church year, we will be hearing the gospel through the perspective of Mark. Believe it or not, you just heard Mark and John's versions of the Christmas story. Our homes would look very different at Christmas time if we decorated for this season based on what these gospel authors said was important for you to know about Christmas. Instead of a humble manger with cattle and sheep, you might have a pan of sand with no trees and with a dirty river running through it. Mark's beginning of the gospel occurs in a wilderness. Instead of a donkey led by Joseph carrying the pregnant Mary on its back through the town of Bethlehem looking for a place to give birth, you would have a scruffy looking character with brown juice running from the corners of his mouth from the locusts that he was munching on for his dinner. Instead of swaddling clothes wrapping around the infant Jesus, the clothes that Mark speaks about at the beginning of his gospel is the not so soft and itchy hide from a camel that the preacher was wearing that was held in place with a leather belt. In Luke's gospel there was a star that guided the shepherds and wisemen to the place where Jesus was born. I'm not sure how you would decorate your house with what attracted the people to Jesus that Mark and John describe in their Christmas stories because it wasn't a thing to look at, it was something to hear. Mark and John say the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ begins with a voice calling people to repent and be baptized.

This voice, the voice of John the Baptizer, which cried out in the wilderness drew a much larger crowd to Jesus than the star ever did. After Mark introduces his gospel by saying the beginning of the good news or the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God, Mark lets us know why everyone from far and wide would not want to miss this first Christmas pageant.

Mark tells us some of the last words that the prophet Malachi spoke to God's people. Mark quotes from Malachi's last sermon when he said, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness." Malachi doesn't give us the name of the person that this voice would come from. Malachi says that someone will come someday. Mark, who is known for rushing

through his gospel, even rushed through the exact words that Malachi said as he closed his sermon that day. If you turn back to Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi was a little more optimistic when he closed his sermon than what Mark records. Malachi actually said, "See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord who you seek will suddenly come to his temple."

The people that heard Malachi went to bed that night expecting the Lord might appear the next day. When he didn't suddenly appear that day or that week, they set their hopes on the following months which became years and these years turned into over 500 years of waiting in silence. There was no voice of God spoken during these years. But for 25 generations of silent nights, faith remained and the story that a voice would prepare the way of the Lord was repeated from one generation to the next and they believed as they waited. We wait a few weeks each year in this season of Advent anticipating Christmas. This time suddenly flies by as we rush to get ready for our Christmas programs and celebrations. But it is hard to imagine what it must have been like waiting 500 years for the sudden arrival of Jesus.

This past Tuesday, I brought this text to the residents of the DNRC to hear and to talk about. Not many of these residents leave this facility anymore or if they do, it isn't often. I have seen many residents' cycle in and out of this care facility over the years and I know of the many families of many of the residents. Some of these residents have families that don't live very close, and some don't have many family members left to come and visit. Then there are some who do have family that live close and are very faithful in visiting. I know of a few who have enough family members living close by so that they can depend on visits from one of their family almost every day. Waiting for a visit that is expected but not happening when you think it will seem like an eternity. However, when they hear that familiar voice from a family member, all is calm and all is bright. Light shines where there once was only darkness.

Today we lit the second candle on the Advent wreath. The candle of faith. Faith is not something we can see like the beautiful nativity sets that remind us of the birth of Jesus. Faith comes to us through a voice that cries out and enters through our ears. There were crowds of people that came all around to hear John the Baptizer's voice after the many years of silence. John the Baptizer did in the gospel readings you heard today what the star did that Luke talked about in his Christmas story. John the Baptizer and the star pointed to Jesus who had come down from heaven above to earth below for a single purpose. To forgive my sins and yours.

How do you know that this forgiveness is for you? You know this because the same voice that spoke to Jesus when John the Baptizer baptized him has spoken to you when you were baptized. As soon as the water hit your head and you heard the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, your Lord suddenly appeared to you and delivered to you the faith that began in your baptism and daily carries you through the joys and sorrows of this life and gives you eternal life. As we heard last week, it is not for you and I to know how long it will be after we are laid to rest in the ground when Jesus will return again. But one thing is for certain. You will not be marking off days on a calendar like we do today waiting for Christmas. Jesus has already arrived for you and me. It will seem as if suddenly you will hear a voice. This voice will be familiar to you. It will be the same voice that promised you eternal life on the day you were baptized.

The waiting is over. The messenger has suddenly arrived in this place again today. His voice speaks to you and to me, I have come down from heaven to earth for you. Amen