

ALREADY BUT NOT YET

Texts: Isaiah 40:3-5
2 Peter 3:8-10
Mark 1:1-5

There are, as you all know, four gospels in the New Testament of our Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of these gospels is unique, each was written at a different period in the first century common era, each was generated by, and addressed to specific communities of followers of Jesus, eventually to become known as *Christians*.

Each gospel has its own unique features, but in this season of Advent it is particularly interesting to lift up the way in which the Gospel of Mark differs from the others. Matthew, Luke, and John each have, in their own ways and within distinctive theological settings, a story or an account or a theological statement about Jesus' entry into the world. There are the familiar Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, and John's contribution to the Incarnation of Jesus is simply, "the word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth."

But Mark has no Christmas story, nothing whatever to say about the birth, early years, or youth of Jesus. Mark just begins at the beginning of Jesus' ministry with this abrupt announcement: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He then pictures John the Baptist in the midst of his work, baptizing persons in the Jordan River, preparing to baptize Jesus, taking the role of the Elijah figure employed in the Old Testament book of Malachi, which predicts that the Messiah will have a forerunner, the prophet Elijah, who would "prepare the way of the Lord".

Mark has no interest in how Jesus came into the world, only that Jesus has arrived and is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies predicting a messianic figure who would come with the liberating power of Moses and the leadership qualities of King David, who would deliver the people from their sins and from the hands of those who oppressed them. This is a gospel about Jesus' adult life and ministry, it is about what Jesus came to do in this world we live in, and what it took, and what it cost for Jesus to be about his tasks here.

The Gospel of Mark is an extremely appropriate choice for Scripture in this Advent season, for there is no content to be used for our forthcoming Christmas celebrations, no references to miraculous events in the skies over Bethlehem, no Oriental visitors from the East following a miraculous star, most importantly, no contribution to the feel-good inspiration that causes our spirits to soar and our lives to be, even for a short time, set apart from the world of cares and woes and uncertainty, and all the other dark stuff that always threatens to intrude into the good gift of life.

No, Mark is about that world, he gets right down to the business of that world, he immediately frames the arrival of Jesus within the sinfulness of humanity, and his gospel, again, will largely point to and prepare for Jesus' Passion and Death, which will redeem the world, and restore the broken relationship between the Creation and the Creator. Indeed, many scholars have referred to the Gospel of Mark as "a passion narrative with a very long introduction".

The Gospel of Mark is good devotional reading for Advent, not because Advent is meant to be a season of suffering, but because neither is Advent, as a liturgical season, a time exclusively to be devoted to Christmas gaiety and mirth. This gospel reminds us that Jesus' entry into the world, the event for which biblical Advent anticipates and awaits, was entry into *our* world. Not the world of once-a-year Christmas carols and beautiful decorations and mirthful characters, but our world of economic recession, and religious turmoil, and sexual misconduct,

and political corruption, and famine, and poverty, and capricious diseases, and unpredictable and often destructive weather, and natural disasters, and that's just in our country.

Not that our world is all bad, of course not, there is much beauty and good and inspiration and self-sacrifice and shared love. But there is enough of the negative stuff that Christmas, in its most enjoyable form, is seen and received and embraced as different and apart from the norm.

But there is no such separation in the Gospel of Mark. Mark recognizes the three-dimensional nature of the world, and wants immediately to place the Son of God in the midst of that world to begin his work of redemption and salvation. And *that* is the substance of the Good News in Mark. Remember how he begins: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This is not to suggest that the other Gospels are the stuff of fairy tales, with Hallmark Channel resolved tensions, and Disney-esque happy endings. No, remember in the Gospel of Luke the ominous prediction given by the old man Simeon to Mary as she presents her newborn son in the Temple to be circumcised:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34-35)

The Gospel of Matthew, with its wonderful story of Wise Men from the East and a miraculous star, brings the story of Jesus' entry into the world back down to earth with the story of King Herod's slaughter of all the babies in Bethlehem just to try to eliminate the baby Jesus.

But Mark does not give us Christmas good cheer in the beginning of his gospel. John the Baptist is waist-deep in the Jordan, awash in the self-perceived sinfulness of those who come to him to be baptized, to have their guilt and shame washed away by the current of the river and the cries of this wild man prophet. Then comes Jesus, to be baptized in the same river, not floating above the Jordan, divinely separate from the human condition, but immersed in it, submitting himself to the same ritual of forgiveness and purification as any other sinful person because, after all, this is his world, too, and he came to minister to us as one of us, vulnerable to the risks of human life, a voice of challenge and hope among the exiles.

For that is what we are: exiles. The season of Advent is a season for exiles, persons of another realm living in a difficult place in a difficult time. Nearly all the material from the Hebrew Scriptures used as Lectionary passages Advent was written when the Jews were in exile in Babylon, deported there when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587 b.c.e. During their nearly century-long captivity in a foreign land, the exiles were occasionally given hope from prophets like Isaiah, who shared with them a vision of God's powerful and triumphant deliverance of them back to their homeland in Israel.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

There is a special temporal signature to this prophecy, let's call it "already but not yet", where the people are assured that God is now, already, in control, the deliverance will happen, redemption will be achieved, it is a *fait accompli*. It is a certainty. It is so certain that they can now already begin celebrating its occurrence. But it just hasn't happened yet, within the

parameters of human time. The exiles are urged to believe in an event which has already happened in the mind of God, but has yet to happen in the experience of humanity.

We are asked to consider in this special season that we are like the exiles in Babylon, that we are in this wonderful and woeful world, but not of this world; that we are citizens of the Reign of God, but resident here. And we, too are waiting for God once again to fulfill a promise to us of liberation and repatriation to our home. This is the sense of the literature of the gospels. All four of the gospels contain the passage from Isaiah I just read, about the exiles returning home and the glory of the Lord being revealed to the whole world.

And because the passage closes with the words, “. . . for the mouth of the Lord has spoken,” the gospel writers wanted us to understand that this event is as good as accomplished, that it is God’s plan, that it will occur; that it’s occurrence is such a surety that we can almost treat it as if it’s already happened. If we need help and hope, all we need do is look at biblical history to see how God ultimately fulfilled the expectations of the faithful people of the past. The Hebrews were in bondage in Egypt and God delivered them. The Jews were in Exile in Babylon and God delivered them back home. The Jews languished under the heel of Rome, and God fulfilled the promise of a Messiah when Jesus came. With the clarity of hindsight, we can see how God promised, then acted to keep them; how the people were asked to think of God’s activity as “already but not yet.” We see how both those dimensions were real and true.

The Epistle of 2 Peter was written to an impatient and discouraged Christian community, one which could only see the “not yet” part of the equation, early followers of Christ, a community which had waited many years for Christ to return without satisfaction. To these believers the writer of the epistle gets into theoretical physics. He says God isn’t bound by time like we mortals are, and so “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” Now we may or may not comprehend this reasoning, but it services the argument that we Christian people are a waiting people, an expectant people, a people bound in time anticipating a God to act who is outside of time. We can see that God has acted in the world already, as God promised to do; and we cling to the hope that, though God has not yet acted again, as God promised to do, God will. Indeed, God has already acted, just not yet.

That is the paradox of Advent. Advent is the season of waiting and expectation, of celebrating what God has done (already), while at the same time anticipating what God has yet promised to do (but not yet). The Sacrament of Holy Communion is offered to us as a way to embrace this mystery. That the Messiah for whom the first Advent People waited, has come, but will also come again to those who wait today. The sacrifice and suffering of Christ represented in this Sacrament is the fruit borne by the world into which Christ was born, the elements reminding us of Jesus’ broken body and shed blood bear witness to the cost of entering into this world as the bearer of the Gospel Good News. So this is a Table of the “already”; it is also a Table of the not yet, for Jesus told his disciples that he would not partake of this meal again until he could share it together with his disciples in the fullness of time.

And so, clinging to the Advent season’s message of “already but not yet”, we come again to the Table of the Lord; hopeful, expectant, waiting, anticipating God to fulfill yet another of God’s promises. This is how we live our lives as people of faith: hopeful, expectant, waiting, anticipating God to act. We are Advent People.

AMEN.