

The Hairy Scary Hope from the Wilderness

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*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, December 4, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Mark 1:1-8

“...The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Movement 1 - Man or Myth

In our minds, we walk amongst giants. In our minds we tend to make people bigger than they actually are, we place them on pedestals and hold them in high esteem. In our minds, we walk amongst giants.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the Wizard in the movie the *Wizard of Oz*. A tiny man who was a stranger, who had a sharp mind, became something bigger than the short, jumpy, professor figure. Partly due to his own ego and partly due to the expectations of the people, the Wizard became larger than life, and his reputation was carried throughout the lands as a benevolent and powerful individual. But when we looked behind the curtain with Dorothy and Toto, we found that the Wizard was only a giant in our own minds and the minds of all the people.

In our minds, we walk amongst giants. We do this with our own American heroes. The phenomenon of tall tales is make giants out of ordinary figures in our own minds. Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and George Washington are some example. We have placed them on pedestals in our annals of history, creating giants out of men. We exaggerate their lives so much that a story about Daniel Boone ‘grinning’ a creature to death, George Washington chopping down cherry trees with a single swoop, and Davy Crockett wearing a live raccoon on his head become plausible. In our own minds, we walk amongst giants.

From our local heroes to our national heroes, to our friends, relatives, and especially our grandchildren (who can never do any wrong... or so I’m told) we have the amazing ability to make someone more than he or she might be in our minds and place them on that pedestal. In our minds, we walk amongst giants.

Movement 2 - Which Myth of Jesus?

Jesus was a giant in the minds of many. After all, Jesus performed amazing feats, Jesus did amazing things, he taught some profound and provocative ideas, and there was something about his presence. Remember the movie *Braveheart*? Stories about the main character, William Wallace spread so that he was eight feet tall, fire shot out of his eyes and lightening out of his.... Or maybe you have read *Don Quixote*. By the end of the book, Don Quixote was running into other individuals who were following the footsteps and ideals of the legendary figure Don Quixote, often exaggerating and embellishing on the deed and acts of another man. The same was done with Jesus. The stories about Jesus traveled as soon as he left a town, and were often swapped before he arrived at the next town. Even after his ministry on earth, after his ascension into heaven, stories about Jesus spread quickly and were often exaggerated. Jesus was lifted up, propped up, and placed on a pedestal in the minds of many of the early followers. Some said that Jesus wasn’t human at all but fully and totally God. Some said that Jesus didn’t perform any healing miracles, while others claimed that Jesus never said anything contrary to the ruling temple establishment. Some claimed Jesus to be a spirit-dweller who was still walking amongst us, and some claimed Jesus to be only another human who was blessed by God. Jesus was a giant in the minds of many, but there was not an agreement, there was uniformity but division and manipulation of the person and actions of Jesus. It wasn’t easy to figure out who this Jesus was, because he was indeed special, he was indeed holy, but the way and the why were not clear. Who is this Jesus?

Is it not similar today? We also have our own ideas of who Jesus ‘really’ was and what Jesus

ministry was ‘really’ about. Authors have recently penned works like Phillip Yancey’s *The Jesus I Never Knew* and Marcus Borg’s *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* offering a fresh and original understanding of Jesus. The *DiVinci Code* gives us a Gnostic and mystical view of Jesus, while *The Left Behind* series suggests a more militaristic and redemptive view of Jesus. Go online and find an action figure Jesus; sports Jesus; Jesus dolls, and on and on all to add to the idea of Jesus that you have in your mind. Is Jesus your friend, your teacher, your guide, or your angel? Who is this Jesus?

In this Advent season I have an especially difficult time focusing on the person of Christ. After all, we are waiting for a baby; we are waiting for an infant, and with an infant come endless possibility. Like passive parents, so many churches avoid projecting the person of Christ onto the baby Jesus. Advent seems to be a time to get excited about Christmas. We mention how we are excited to gather around the tree, and we drudge through a sermon so we can get another Sunday out of our way and be that closer to Christmas day. Have we pacified Jesus in this Advent season, have we turned his message and made it temped and shallow – fitting for an infant? We have created an image of Christmas in our mind that is only about preparing not for the birth of Christ, but the showing of love through presents. But the birth is only special if we truly understand who this Jesus is. We have the gift of hindsight; we know the story and where it is going to end. So it is fitting as we prepare for the birth of Christ to turn to the gospels for guidance and direction giving us some focus of who it is we are preparing for. Who is this Jesus?

Look at the very first verse in the Gospel of Mark, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Who is Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God – a very specific term and title that holds depth in its meaning. Jesus is a royal king, a leader, and an anointed one who is not chosen by humanity but is given by God. There is a special relationship, a holy relationship between the Son and God. All throughout the Gospel we find people behaving badly around Jesus because they are not clear on whom this Jesus really and truly is; they are not clear that Jesus is the chosen, the Son of God. So Mark is written to set the record straight, and to show how important it is to understand and follow Jesus in an honest way. This is the good news, the message of victory of Jesus Christ, the Son of God – this is the real story about Jesus. There are so many images in our minds of who Jesus is that we may very well need to return to the Gospel of Mark and read again who this Jesus truly is, so that the giant of the Christ that is in our minds can be the Jesus Christ who lived, walked, died, and rose again. Especially in this time of waiting, this time of Advent, we should have a firm idea of whom it is that we are waiting for, and why it is that we get so excited with Christ’s birth.

Movement 3 - The Wilderness School

To prepare for the true Jesus, come out of the world and into the wilderness. We need to leave the hustle and bustle, we need to leave the distractions and the diversions, the demands and the pressures of our time and get out into the wilderness to even begin to prepare ourselves to really meet Jesus. This is where Mark brings us right away, into the wilderness. The wilderness is a powerful place; it is a place of great devotion, of wrestling and of transformation. One commentator described the wilderness as a place where God can be alone with the people. Another described the wilderness as a time of rigorous discipline. It is fitting to get away, to set ourselves apart from the world and be with Christ in the wilderness. Anthony of the Desert, the founder of the Monastic movement in Christianity, went off to the desert to truly and fully devote himself to Christ. In the desert he wrestled, and fought with demons and came as close as possible to touching the hem of Christ’s garment. In the wilderness we can be with Christ.

It is in the wilderness where we first meet John the Baptist – the messenger, the one who comes before Jesus. Do you see him, dressed with camel hair, with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey? Do you see him, dressed in a deerskin outfit, with a rope around his waist, eating bugs and forest plants? Do you see him, dressed in the old red sweatshirt, the trench coat with holes, newspapers on his feet and a rope for a belt, eating scraps and whatever is currently being offered at the local food shelter? This is the one, this is the Baptist crying out to us to turn from our ways, prepare for the coming of the Lord. He is so different because he has devoted his life to living in the wilderness. He is so different because he has fully committed to following God and preparing for Christ. John is focused and ready for Christ. He is here in the wilderness, in the place of rigorous discipline, of connection with

God. It is in the wilderness that we go to prepare for Jesus, and we meet John the Baptist.

Movement 4 – The Repentant Response

Hear and respond to the call of John the Baptist. What is it about John the Baptist that makes him such an interesting figure? What is it about him that captures our attention? Is it the message? John is proclaiming and calling all to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Isn't it interesting that in this time of year we don't read a passage of the great feast Christ prepares, nor do we read of the gifts that we are to go and offer to Christ? John is not calling us to prepare with spending sprees and buying power. John is not calling us to prepare for Christ with well-rehearsed singing or preparing a nursery for the baby Jesus. No, John is calling us to repent, to turn, to shed our old lives and return to the life that God calls us to live. John is saying that Christ is coming soon, that the Lord, the Son of God will be here any day and the way to prepare is to repent and be baptized. Can you imagine if you spend each day in this holiday season wearing dark clothing and mourning for all the wrong you may have done in your life? Can you imagine coming to church on Christmas Eve and falling on your knees crying, "Lord forgive my selfish thoughts, forgive my judgmental nature, forgive my critical tongue, forgive my violent life, forgive my sins, for I want to be ready for you." What a different view and understanding of the holiday season, it would be like living in the wilderness. Yet such an approach is appropriate to advent, it is a time to prepare for the return of Christ. We are preparing for the return of the Son of God, the anointed one, the King of us all, and like wanting to don a beautiful garment; we don the forgiveness of our baptism. You see, when you are baptized you are saying yes to the assurance that no matter what you will still be forgiven, you will still be accepted in Christ's arms and in God's heart.

You may be saying at this point, "Where are the stories of the birth? Where are the stories of Mary and Joseph? Aren't we supposed to be preparing for the birth of Christ?" Yes, but if we aren't clear who Christ is and what Christ offers, then the birth is meaningless. But if we took the time to journey through the gospel of Mark, to read about healings, to hear again the teachings, and see how the gospel leads right to the cross and the resurrection then we would know what this Jesus that we are following is really about. Then we will hear the call of John the Baptist with ears of knowing. We hear and we know that Christ is one who calls us to repentance and one who offers forgiveness. And we would hear and respond to that call as we saw done today.

Movement 5 – Hairy, Scary Proclamation

It does not end with this baptism. It does not end with the waters making us clean. No, this hope continues to meeting and experiencing Jesus Christ. Listen to what John says about this Jesus: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Our messenger, our hairy prophet is the servant of Jesus, the one who is to come after. John is making it clear for us that we are only being prepared for the full baptism of Jesus. We are washed from the outside in as John baptizes us, but when Jesus baptizes us, we are washed from the inside out. What John offers is just the first step; it is the call and the invitation to saying yes to Christ. And then when we see Christ, the baby or the man, and we hold to that "yes" then the fire of the Holy Spirit will ignite our very souls and change who we are. This is what makes John's proclamation of hope so powerful. John is not calling the people to follow him, for John is just another of God's messengers. John is not the Son of God. Instead, John is calling the people to prepare for Christ, our savior, our redeemer, the one so great that we are not even worthy to untie his sandal.

And Christ's baptism is different because it is permanent. We can be washed in the tub and the river and the stream and the pond again and again. There is a story of the Billy Graham Crusades. In the end of one of the revivals, a man can forward with the others, yelling and wailing, and weeping saying, "Fill me Lord, fill me Lord." The next week the man was there again crying out the same thing. The following week he was again present. The next time he came forward yelling, "Fill me Lord, fill me," and a woman cried out from the balcony, "Forget him, Lord, he leaks!" We can cry out to Christ again and again that we are repentant, that we are sorry, and that we are going to try to live a better life. And we will again and again need to return to those waters if the baptism is on our own - if it is a baptism of human

hands. The water of John's baptism will dry, and we will again and again gather dirt, dust and mud. But the water of Christ's baptism will forever cling to our lives. That is why today Linda renewed her baptism. The one she received as an infant, the Holy Spirit was still working in and with her. We are the ones who turn and need again and again to be reminded of that baptism. That is the hope, which John the Baptist offers and the hope with Christ will bring.

Movement 6 – Point to Jesus

So who is this Jesus that we are waiting for? What do we know about him? In the Gospel of Mark, we have only just started, in this Advent season, we are just waiting to hear, and we know from the messenger from the wilderness that Jesus is coming. We know that we are called to repent and ask for forgiveness in preparation for the coming of our Lord, and we know that the baptism which Christ offers is through the power of the Holy Spirit that cleanses and changes us beyond what water can do. It is with that knowledge that we prepare for the coming and the birth of Jesus.

When we finally make it to the manger, we fall on our knees because this baby born is the one who will give you a baptism of the Holy Spirit. We fall on our knees because this baby born is the one who is greater even than John the Baptist. We fall on our knees because we know where this baby is headed and what the wood of the cross will demand of him. We fall on our knees because we know what the Gospel of Mark proclaims that this baby is the holy one, the royal savior, and the king, the Son of God. We fall on our knees because through our own baptism, we have promised to follow him and to live out our forgiveness. Let go of any other ideas, misconception, and ideals about Jesus and follow him as the one who baptizes and forgives you and me.

AMEN