

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 1:1–8

Sermon: “Into the Middle”

In the season of Advent, we begin to tell the story of salvation again but anew. If the prayer of Advent 1 is to invoke God to “*stir up Your power,*” the next step is to pray God will “*stir up our hearts*” (Collect). God does this by the way and word of the prophets.

The Gospel of Mark drops us directly into this story. So, it is with the liturgy of our daily lives. John the Baptist (in the Gospel) enters amid the stressful hustle and bustle of our culture’s holiday season as it both parallels and diverges from this liturgical season of hope and expectation. His call, like those of all the prophets whose train he culminates, is the call of repentance, of turning away from all the ways of life that would close us in on ourselves and then turning toward the way of the One who comes after him, the One who “*is not slow to fulfill his promise, . . . but is patient*” (2 Peter 3:9, Epistle).

Many of our favorite stories start with a dramatic technique called (from the classical Latin) *in medias res*, meaning simply “into the middle of things.” We are dropped into the middle of the story, and the roller coaster ride begins. As a matter of fact, one of the most beloved stories that we read and watch and hear over and over again this time of year begins exactly like this, *in medias res*. It begins with three little words: “Marley was dead.” And with that, Charles Dickens plunges us into the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, Tiny Tim, and what it means to “keep Christmas well.”

Or perhaps even more famously, *in medias res* is the opening scene of the black-and-white montage of sights from a town named Bedford Falls where all we hear are the prayers of “a lot of people asking for help for a man named George Bailey.” The rest of the movie tells us the story of his “wonderful life” and of how he got to this one present moment on a bridge on Christmas Eve. And then everything that happens afterward.

We conceive of our lives and all of human history, really in narrative terms: beginning, middle, end. That is how we make sense of our world and our place in it. All these stories that start “in the middle of things” play with our sense of how any story should go. This is what piques our interest. For the story to work, it often uses flashbacks and interruptions from the past to fill in the blanks of the present and move it forward into the future.

Scrooge never took Marley’s name off the sign of his office.

George Bailey can’t hear in his left ear because he saved his brother out of a frozen lake when he was a boy.

The exact same thing is true of the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, ***“the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”*** (v 1). The Gospel of Mark begins in the middle of the story. For one thing, it starts with a sentence fragment, almost as if we came in somewhere in the middle of a conversation. And have you noticed Mark doesn’t have any of our favorite stories for this time of year.

No nativity (that's Luke). No Wise Men (that's Matthew). No big speech about the Word made flesh (that's John).

Mark simply begins in the middle of a sentence, and then immediately flashes back hundreds of years to a prophet named Isaiah. Only to flash forward again to land us in the wilderness with this other prophet named John. Preaching repentance. Wearing camel skins and eating locusts. Preparing the way for the mightier one who will come after him. And then, fade to black. Mark leaves us in suspense until the next scene opens. Maybe next week. Or maybe the week after that. Who knows?

Why would Mark do this, drop us into the middle of the story only to leave us hanging? Part of it, I would imagine is to pique our interest. Mark wants us to be so filled with eager anticipation that we cannot help but read it all the way through to the end. And then, like any great story, to turn back to the beginning to see what we missed the first time around.

As a matter of fact, the Gospel of Mark moves so fast that we could do exactly that this afternoon, read all sixteen chapters with time to spare before dinner.

But the real point is that this is exactly how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the world. In medias res. In the middle of things. Into the middle of human history. The way Mark tells the story, this Jesus seems to come to us from out of nowhere, out of a nowhere town called Nazareth, from a nowhere place called Galilee.

The way Mark tells the story, it is almost as if we never would have noticed him, except that there is this prophet named John, prophesied by another prophet named Isaiah, preparing the way. Well, this is exactly how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, comes into our own lives. Jesus comes in medias res, in the middle of things. Into the hustle and bustle of a holiday season that often doesn't even remember the "reason for the season."

Into the messiness of our everyday lives. A stressful job. A frantic home life. A pandemic. The days that turn to weeks that turn to years before we can even blink an eye. Into all the brokenness and failure all those things “we have done . . . and left undone”—that we want to gloss over with a red-and-green sweater and a smile. Jesus comes into the Middle of our lives to stir up our hearts to the life that only He can give.

John the Baptist prepared the way for this life to enter our lives by proclaiming “***repentance for the forgiveness of sin***” (v 4). To repent simply means “to turn” from one thing to another. John is calling us to turn from whatever it is that is distracting us from the life that really matters in the middle of this hustle and bustle that will never slow down.

John is calling us to turn to the One whose shoes we are not worthy to tie, but who nonetheless came to stoop down to wash our feet. The One who speaks tenderly to Jerusalem, who speaks comfort, comfort to all his people (Isaiah 40:1–2).

The One who is patient toward us all, so that none of us may perish (2 Peter 3:9). The One who would eventually give his all, his life into death on the cross, so that we might have eternal life.

But that's jumping ahead. The next scene in the "beginning of the gospel" according to Mark is about to start. And I'm not just talking about Christmas morning. When it does come, we will finally see this one Jesus Christ, the Son of God face-to-face.

Our Advent expectations hinge on the certain hope that just as Jesus Christ came into the world, he will come again. And he will come then just as he came two thousand years ago and just as he comes to us now: in medias res, in the middle of things. We don't know when. We don't know how. But he will come into the messiness of this world, into the messiness of our own lives. ***"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise."*** And he will come again to bring forth ***"new heavens and a new earth"*** (2 Peter 3:9, 13). I can hardly wait to see what happens next.

Amen