



Celebrating Christmas With Mark

TEXT
Mark 1:9–12

December 2, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

When our kids were younger, Christmas meant a road trip. We would rotate among my wife's siblings: first to brother Bob's house; then brother Dave's house; then sister Laura's. Finally, we would host. We drew names for gift exchanges. It seems most years I would get Uncle Dave, which is an envied choice. He's impossible to shop for. But he is the most gracious of all of us. No matter what you give him, he will say it's perfect. You could give him salt and pepper shakers that look like nuns playing bongos, and he would say, "Perfect!"

The family meal is the center of the gathering. You should have been there the year everyone got tossed from the kitchen because we had an abundance of gravy experts — I think there were six. It turns out when you have that many experts in gravy, you can stack them all end to end, and they still will not reach a conclusion on how thick gravy needs to be.

We sit at the feasting table, hold hands and sing the Doxology for our table prayer. The meal will be wonderful. We will tell updates of what's going on

and tell stories we have told before, including the story about the gravy experts being evicted from the kitchen. We will take the family pictures, hugs all around, get back in the car and head home.

I loved the way they all decorated for Christmas. Brother Bob always had a big tree. Brother Dave had single candle lights burning in every window. Sister Laura loved her Christmas cookies and played carols on the piano. At our home, there was a nativity scene in almost every room.

So, I wonder, what do you think it would be like to celebrate Christmas with the Gospel writers in their homes? We will do that this Advent. Today we are invited to Mark's house.

The first thing you will notice is that Mark will need us to tell him it's Christmas. Mark's gospel reveals no knowledge of Christmas. He never speaks of Jesus as a baby or mentions a special birth. He has no wreath on the door. There are no Advent candles on the breakfast room table. No Christmas tree in the den. There are no Christmas carols being played on the piano. No garland on the mantel. When you are at Mark's house, there is absolutely no way to know that

it's Christmas; it just seems like ordinary time. But that may be why it is important to begin with Mark.

Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation, the good news that God has chosen to take on flesh and step into human history.

Mark may not know how Jesus was born, but Mark knows where the Son of God, the love of God can be found in this world. He is very clear about that.

He will tell you how Jesus was baptized, and as he came up out of the water, the Spirit of God fell on him, and he heard the voice of God: "You are my Son, whom I love." It is a sweet moment. But it doesn't last long. Immediately, the Spirit casts Jesus out into the wilderness.

Now when we hear the word *wilderness*, we are supposed to remember all the other wilderness stories; and if we do, we remember this. The wilderness isn't a zip code. The wilderness is anywhere that God's people are tested. The wilderness is anywhere we must decide if God's word can be trusted. The wilderness is where God's way will seem foolish, and other voices will often sound reasonable. The wilderness is anywhere that disappointment is fresh, anywhere hearts are broken, anywhere

the spirit is in the storm. In the wilderness, we battle to stand tall because we are surrounded by forces that would make us afraid and small, and forget that we, too, are the children of God.

You know wilderness. You might find it at home, at work, sometimes even in church. The wilderness is never far away.

Mark knows this. The reason Jesus is cast into the wilderness is because that's where we all live, at least sometimes. And if you ask me, Jesus never gets out of that wilderness. From the beginning to the end of Mark's gospel, Jesus is in the battle. He battles demons and storms. He pushes against social structures that oppress. From his first moment until his last, he is in the battle — feeding the hungry and healing the sick and attacking the powers that dehumanize us. His ministry starts that way and it ends that way, with his blood spilling on wilderness ground. And then we hear it again. Truly he was the Son of God.

If I understand the text, Mark is telling us that he may not know where Jesus was born, but he knows where the Son of God can be found: in the wilderness — because that's where we are, at least some of the time we are. The Son of God shows up in the broken places.

So, Mark's home is likely to be a mobile home. You might find Mark's house in the center of town where the powers of the city meet and there is always tension between ideals and politics. Or his home can be in the suburbs, with manicured lawns and children with activities sched-

uled morning, noon and night — running after some promised future that consumes the gift of the present. He sometimes lives in a noisy rental, with locks on the door and the neighbor's TV playing too loudly. He sometimes lives in the dorm, the place of all-nighters, and those lonely times trying to decide who you are going to be with your life. Or in the retirement home where the pictures of the grandchildren fill the shelf, but the loneliness is in the air.

He is in hospital rooms and jail cells, where nightmares are lived in the daytime and morning comes too often with no promise of a new day.

Mark doesn't know where Jesus was born, but he knows where the Son of God lives: in the wilderness, because the Son of God shows up in the broken places.

At Mark's house, they don't sing *Silent Night* or *Away in a Manger*, but they know *There Is a Balm in Gilead* by heart.

So here's what I hope. I hope you can bypass Mark's house this Christmas. I hope your life is full of joy, that those you love are well. I hope the worst thing that happens for you this Christmas is you get kicked out of the kitchen because you complained about the gravy. But it's not that way for many, and maybe not for you.

We learned this weekend that President Bush, "41" as he is sometimes called, died. I don't know how you remember him, but I think of him as the "kinder and gentler" President. He was a man of character. The nation will remember his military service or

his work in the CIA, of his time in the White House as both Vice President and then President.

But there will also be a very public profession that he was not simply these, but a dad and a grandfather. I read that George W. Bush called him and said, "I love you, Dad." He said, "I love you too." It is reported those were his last words. *I love you*: They are the most important words.

I think Mark knows this. When your life is hard, when your heart is broken, when you eat disappointment for breakfast and the night is long in fear, in those moments, sometimes with the greatest clarity, we discover the Son of God, or learn that the Son of God has discovered us — for he has come to say, "I love you." And those are the most important words.

Christmas can be hard. It's supposed to be so wonderful, so joyful, so stitched together with love. But sometimes that just magnifies our hunger, our grief, our fear. That's when we need to spend Christmas with Mark, because he knows the Son of God will meet us in the broken places.

If that's you, you will want to visit Mark's house this Christmas. He will get it.

I am thinking of those of you who are painfully aware of the empty place at the table because death has come in all its harshness this year.

I am thinking of those of you who have all the externals lined up in perfect order — family, career, accomplishments — and yet there is a hole in your soul, and you feel absolutely lost.

I'm thinking of those of you who look at the world the way it is, and it breaks your heart. You yearn for a sense-maker; you hunger for kindness and compassion; you are starved for a love that can be trusted.

You will be welcomed at Mark's house. Mark's house is filled with those who are in the storm, who find themselves in the wilderness. That wilderness can show up anywhere, and the truth is, it is never far away.

One last thing: When Jesus was in that wilderness, it says he was with the wild beasts. You know what that is, don't you? Mark has the promise of the old prophet Isaiah running around in the back of his head.

Do you remember? The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. It's a metaphor of God's promised day. Jesus goes into the wilderness, as God's holy love in flesh, and signs of God's promised day break out.

That's Christmas at Mark's house. It's a gathering of those who are in the struggle; and there among them, Jesus shows up, and we get glimpses of God's promised day.

At Mark's house, there is no sign that it's Christmas. But everywhere you look, you can tell the love of God has taken on flesh and has come to live where you live and to speak the only words that really matter: "You are my child, whom I love."

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.