



## **“Christmas at Mark’s House”**

First Sunday of Advent,

December 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5 and Mark 1:1-8

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI

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Today we begin our “Home for the Holidays” series. Over the four Sundays of Advent we’re going to look at Christmas in the gospels—how the four different gospel writers describe the birth and beginnings of Jesus.

So we’ll be thinking about what Christmas looks like at the homes of the four gospel authors.

In Matthew’s house, we meet Joseph and Mary. We learn how righteous Joseph is, and we learn that Jesus is to be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

We also meet an angel, Herod, and the Magi.

### **Christmas in the Gospels**

<b>At Matthew’s House</b>	<b>At Luke’s House</b>	<b>At John’s House</b>
Joseph	Zech/Eliz	Beginning
Righteousness	Mary’s song	Light
Angel	Angels	Life
Emmanuel	Shepherds	Word-->Flesh
Magi	Good news	Grace & truth

At Luke’s house, it’s very crowded. We meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. We hear Mary singing a song about God turning things upside down, and we meet the shepherds and the angels, who sing about good news of great joy for all the people.

At John’s house we don’t see as many people, but we hear some poetry about light and life and about the word becoming flesh to dwell among us full of grace and truth. John’s house feels a bit like a holy place, a mystical place.

Compared to the other gospels, things are pretty quiet at Mark’s house. We hear some ancient scripture and John the Baptist appears. Listen for God’s word from Mark 1.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, “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. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

No angels, no shepherds, no star in the sky. No songs, no poetry. No Herod, no Magi. No inn-keeper. (Actually there’s no inn keeper in the Bible, only in Christmas pageants.) At Mark’s house there is no Joseph, no Mary and no baby Jesus.

Christmas at Mark’s house looks pretty quiet and clean and simple.

The only person there is John the Baptist, with his bizarre clothes and not so appetizing diet. Not exactly the life of the Christmas party.

And his words don’t initially sound like good news.

Let’s dig in a little deeper to three of the words we find at Mark’s house. Maybe there is a little more to Christmas at Mark’s house than we see on the surface.

1. Beginning. The gospel opens with “The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”

**Beginning** ἀρχή

start source norm first principle

Right away we learn that something new has come. And the Greek word for beginning, *arche*, has a deeper sense, of norm, or first principle, suggesting something really important.

If you've studied Mark, you'll know that it's the unfinished gospel, so what begins with Jesus is apparently unfinished and ongoing.

2. Prepare. Twice in Mark's house, in these 8 verses, we hear the word prepare.

**Prepare**    ἑτοιμάσατε

to adapt for a particular purpose

to make things ready....for a hostile invasion,

to make one's self ready

Mark seems to be suggesting that as this new beginning emerges, we need to make ourselves ready, with the potential for hostility or challenge. We need to be ready for a new and particular purpose.

3. And we hear the word repentance. John the Baptist is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

**Repentance**    μετάνοια

sorrow, regret   change of direction

surrender to God   change of mind

Repentance, *metanoia* in Greek, is one of those words with a lot of negative baggage but it really simply means changing direction, changing one's mind, getting back on track.

Just a few verses further into Mark 1, John is arrested, and Jesus announces the coming of God's kingdom, telling people to repent and believe the Good News.



John the baptizer appeared  
in the wilderness, proclaiming a  
baptism of repentance for the  
forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:4

So Christmas at Mark's house isn't quite the festive party that it is at Matthew, Luke, or John's houses.

Christmas at Mark seems to be about getting ready for a new start.

At Mark's house it's time to clean up, to get rid of the junk, and get ready for something special, something new.

At our house here in Madison, we like to have guests to share meals and fun together. Before guests come, we clean up the house. We appreciate the added benefit of having company—as it nudges us to clean up.

It would be nice if we kept our house neat and tidy all the time, but we don't. And I know ours isn't the only one.

Keeping our houses neat and tidy and free of unnecessary junk is hard.

Keeping our lives neat and tidy and free of unnecessary junk is even harder.

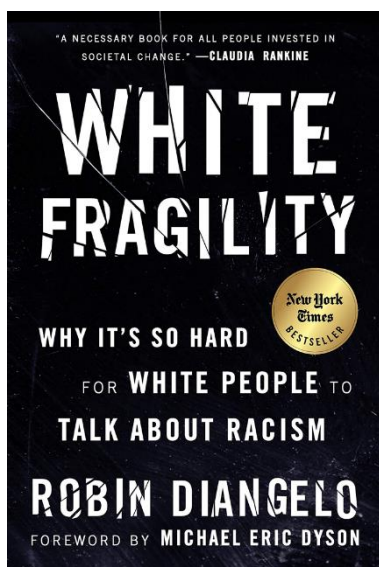
If we're celebrating Christmas at Mark's house, it seems that John the Baptist is encouraging us to get ready to prepare for this new beginning, by trying to make things neater, tidier, and free of unnecessary junk.

It's really hard to do as we're surrounded by all the noise of Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

So John calls us to repent—by changing directions and by cleaning up our lives—by letting go of the foolishness, the selfishness, the wasted times, the misplaced priorities.

This preparation and repentance are just the beginning, and Mark's Jesus invites us to make that transformation part of our daily living.

We don't simply say "I want to be a Christian" one time and be done with it. Instead, it's a lifelong journey, like it is with exercise or nutrition. You can't just go once to the gym or eat one salad and think you'll be healthy for life. It takes day to day persistence.



I thought about the challenge and opportunity of transformation as I was reading *White Fragility*. We have an Adult Ed class working through this important and challenging book. Written by a white educator, *White Fragility* helps us to see that racism isn't just a bad deed done by a bad person.

Racism is more systemic, more all-encompassing. Jim Wallis says racism is America's original sin.

In the conclusion of *White Fragility*, DiAngelo challenges readers to do the ongoing hard work of interrupting racism:

Interrupting racism takes courage and intentionality...we must never consider ourselves finished with our learning. I continue to receive feedback on my stubborn patterns and unexamined assumptions. (p. 153)

In a way she sounds like John the Baptist, calling for repentance.

I'm intrigued by how she describes the importance of feedback in the book, noting how challenging it is to give and receive honest feedback on racism, without becoming defensive or shutting down.

I think it's important for us to find appropriate ways to give and receive feedback not only on racism, but more broadly on how we are living the Christian life, on what sins are holding us back, on where we struggle.

If you have a spouse with whom can honest and open conversations about these things, you are very lucky. Maybe you have a friend, or a small group where these honest and open conversations can happen.

At the least we all have the opportunity every Sunday for feedback through prayer. We offer a prayer of confession and then listen for what God might be saying to us, to guide us, renew us, transform us and lead us forward.

This is the new beginning that John announced.

Advent is as good a time as any to listen, repent, prepare, and begin to grow.

Robin DiAngelo concludes *White Fragility* with a call to be persistent in repentance, with the hope of change. She's talking about racism, but her words could be from John the Baptist.

It is a messy, lifelong process, but one that is necessary to align my professed values with my real actions. It is also deeply compelling and transformative. (p. 154)

The Advent season has begun.

The Good News of Gospel has begun.

God's light is shining, bringing love to the world

With preparation and repentance and intentionality and openness to feedback, the good news takes root in our hearts, our church, our world, and even in our homes. Amen.