

The Beginning?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 10, 2023 – Morning Worship on Advent 3

Text: Mark 1:1-5

Our Advent journey continues this week. Mary has found out the baby is on its way. Joseph has had the encounter with the angel who convinced him to stay with Mary even though the child she carried was not his. News of Caesar's census which would compel them to make the long journey to Bethlehem is just trickling down to the rural outposts that make up the towns of Palestine. And what of our journey, our preparations, as we anticipate the birth of the Christ Child into our hearts and minds once more? Of course, we've all been frantic with our preparations for Christmas – shopping, decorating, baking, Christmas cards sent and received or at least thought about. And then of course there's the inevitable schedule negotiations for special meals and events with family and friends. So much to be done. So many details to be managed. No wonder this is both a wonderful and an extremely stressful time of year!

However, even though I sympathize with all your dilemmas and challenges as December 25 inches ever closer, that wasn't my question. I didn't ask you how you were doing with getting ready for *Christmas* during this time of preparation. I asked you about your *Advent* preparations – how you are preparing yourself – body, mind and spirit – to welcome the Baby Jesus into your hearts and into your lives. They are not the same thing. Not at all. A fact I am more and more aware of with every passing year. I am willing to bet that you have seen more images of the Grinch this year than you have the Baby Jesus. The tiny Babe in the manger is virtually invisible, this year especially, as we claim to be preparing for the holiday celebrating his birth. Or if we do see images of the Holy Family, they are, shall we

say, not always as conducive to a feeling of the sacred as one would think they would be. Just yesterday Peter and I came across a Holy Family snow globe in Target. Don't even get me started ...

What most of us don't fully realize is that Advent is the season in the church when we "anticipate the coming of Christ from three different perspectives: The physical nativity in Bethlehem, the reception of Christ in the heart of the believer, and the eschatological Second Coming"¹ of Christ at the end of time. The first one – the physical nativity in Bethlehem – is the one we celebrate through the creche sets and Nativity scenes we have here in the church, at our homes, on Christmas cards and even in snow globes in Target. That is literally part of Advent – paying attention to the depictions of Christ's birth as a reminder that this is the time of year when we intentionally remember it – this sacred moment when Emmanuel – God With Us – came into the center of God's beloved Creation as a vulnerable baby.

The second way we anticipate Jesus' birth is to pay attention to how it is we are welcoming, or better yet, encouraging Jesus to come into our hearts – into our awareness more than we usually do. Yes, that hopefully happens when we are here in church on Sundays. It happens when we offer holiday greetings to friends and family. It also happens as we try to do something special, something out of the ordinary, for people who may be struggling this time of year. Jesus' primary teaching is to treat others as we would like to be treated so it only makes sense that if we needed help of some sort, we would hope fellow followers of Jesus would be there for us. This is exactly what we are doing through our Advent project this year in supporting Operation Fresh Start's Adopt A Family. The great thing about these kinds of projects is that not only do we get to make a tangible difference in the lives of real people, but we also get to have fun doing

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent>

it!! I loved shopping for the tags I picked up for our OFS family! I was imagining how it would feel to get something you asked for in a moment when life felt particularly harsh. What a gift to bring a smile to people in such a moment!

The last one – the eschatological Second Coming – that’s the one we tend to gloss over, in our church at least. Some churches have this aspect of Advent front and center all the time with their emphasis continually on the end of time and who will be ready to “meet Jesus.” For me, I’m not even sure I would include this as a part of Advent even though it clearly has been a part of the tradition as it developed over the centuries. In this church, in our denomination – the United Church of Christ – we tend to focus on the here and now – the present reality in which we are living and leave the whole notion of the end times in God’s hands. We believe that there is just too much work for us to be doing in the here and now to bring the light and love of God into the world God has entrusted to us. We just don’t have time to focus on what might happen as time ends. Instead we focus on injustice issues like racism, sexism, the mistreatment of members of the LGBTQ+ community, and so many others. We worry about the environment and how too many people just don’t care that we are slowly but surely destroying it. We worry about the kind of lives our children and grandchildren will lead as violence and greed become ever more present in our lives.

All this is why I was so fascinated that this particular text from Mark was the Gospel text for this week in the Lectionary. Mark does not begin with a story of the birth of Jesus. No, his account of Jesus’ life and ministry begins with one simple sentence: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Thus Mark’s focus begins immediately with Jesus as an adult, not as the sweet little baby heralded by angels and worshiped by kings. Instead, Mark reminds

his readers that Jesus is the one prophesied in Isaiah. If the words of this part of the reading from Mark sounded especially familiar that's because it's from Isaiah 40, the text we reflected on together last week. But Mark doesn't stop there. He continues on to introduce us to "John the baptizer" whose ministry he then describes before jumping right into the story of Jesus' baptism. It's worth noting that John is also present in the nativity story as Luke presents it. He's right there in the first chapter of Luke. John was the baby who leaped in his mother Elizabeth's belly when the pregnant Mary approached for a visit after learning from the angel Gabriel that her life had just changed forever. We also forget that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins meaning that John and Jesus were also cousins. They literally knew each other before they were born.

Did Mark know this as he wrote his words to describe how Jesus' began his ministry? We don't know. What we do know, and this is evident throughout Mark's Gospel, is that what Mark cares most about is the immediacy of what Jesus did with his short life and ministry. Mark wants to get right to the "good news" of Jesus as quickly as he possibly can: what he taught, the impact he had on the others, the way a person's understanding of and connection to God changed forever after an encounter with Jesus. This is what mattered most to Mark, which is why on this third Sunday of Advent, his Gospel is the perfect choice for our focus because Mark cuts right to the most important thing about Jesus -- that he is the Emmanuel, God with us, God's love made tangible for us in the flesh.

I also think that by starting his Gospel account of Jesus' life in this way, Mark gifts us with a unique opportunity at this time of year to reflect more intentionally, more deeply, on how our own relationships with Jesus and with the church began, as well as how we are living them out in our lives each day. Mark is inviting us to

remember our own beginnings as followers of Jesus. Many of us, myself included, were born into families where God, Jesus and the church were just part of life. Church and Sunday School on Sunday were just an expectation, a reality around which the rest of life revolved. Adults – our parents and grandparents -- were active in the church too, offering hours of time to women’s circles and men’s groups. Mother-Daughter Banquets and other special celebrations were anticipated and thoroughly enjoyed. Being asked to serve on a Board was an honor and privilege to which many aspired but few achieved. In the church of my childhood, we literally had more people anxious to serve on boards and committees than we had slots to give them. There was never any shortage of volunteers for any project the church leadership identified as needed. So, this leads us to the inevitable question as we ponder our churches of today – what the heck happened?

As you might imagine, this is a question that has never been far from my heart during my 35+year career in ministry. Not so much in the beginning of my career when as a Minister of Education and Family Life I oversaw a Christian Education program with an enrollment surpassing 150 children in Nursery through 8th Grade. The church had three youth groups, each of which had at least two dozen active participants and plenty of adult volunteers for all of it. I certainly had my hands full, and I loved every minute of it. I was aware around the edges that many other churches were not so lucky as their numbers were falling and finances were shaky. Like everyone else I was horrified by the avalanche of accusations of ongoing abuse coming out of the Catholic Church. I was annoyed by the little neighborhood churches who boasted of who they would not welcome in their doors – LGBTQ+ people and others they deemed unworthy for one reason or another. But in my mind and heart I just swatted

those nagging concerns away like so many irritating mosquitos. But still I could sense something – I didn't know what – was changing, and not in a good way. It was an insidious change which crept up on us, but it was there.

My own moment of disillusionment came when I was working with our Associate Minister to plan the annual youth Mission Trip. My own daughter was old enough to go so the planning was especially important to me. We held the first meeting to plan with parents and I think they were talking about going to the Back Bay Mission in Mississippi to work on building homes for poor black families in the area, a worthy task for sure, and a place where a group of 16-20 high schoolers could have a real impact in a week. But it had its drawbacks. The kids would sleep in unairconditioned barracks style accommodations and an 6-8 hour work day was an expectation. However, as the last day of the trip, the kids would be rewarded with a daylong outing to nearby New Orleans. As we outlined the plans, there was grumbling and then outright rebellion on the parts of parents and kids. Why? Because this trip didn't sound like much of a vacation. Weren't the kids taking their spring vacation week to go? Then, shouldn't it really be a vacation with a little work around the edges? And this was coming from the parents even more than some of the kids. I was stunned as was my colleague. Needless to say the Back Bay trip to Mississippi didn't happen. Instead they went to a mission site in San Antonio, Texas which offered half day work days, nice accommodations, and a one day excursion into Mexico. It was also way more expensive so it would require a lot more fundraising to go. Or wealthier parents, of which we had a lot, could just write out a bigger check. I will say that my daughter loved the trip. All the kids, and parents, did. I know Amanda came home having had some life changing experiences which helped to form her first desires of a career

in law. But I will forever remember that first meeting when the fact that the original trip wouldn't have been a vacation was my first worrisome hint that the church had some serious trouble heading its way. And that proved to be true. A story for another time...

So, dear ones, what are we to take away from Mark's invitation to consider the beginning of Jesus' ministry and not the magical stories of his birth as the key piece of our own Advent preparations? What does our third Sunday of Advent focus on the flame of love have to do with all of this anyway? That at least is easy to answer. Love is the foundation of the beginning, the middle, and the end of Jesus' life on earth. Jesus was love incarnate, made flesh, which is how we know he was and is God's son. No ordinary human could so perfectly embody God's love for God's beloved Creation – for us as God's people. Yes, preparing for Christmas is a wonderful thing for most of us. Buying gifts, decorating even a little bit, traditions we love at home and at church – they are beloved and so they should be. But our celebrations of the beginning of Jesus life as a beatific baby in a stable being sung to by angels is not the most important thing about Jesus. It was never intended to be. Mark has it right. The love of God Jesus made real through his life and ministry as an adult was and is the most important thing about Jesus. In Mark we are invited to get right to it, right into knowing how Jesus changed the world forever after his encounter with his cousin John at the Jordan River. Jesus taught us all that it means to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as much as we love ourselves because it is in this way that we show, that we prove, our love is for God and not ourselves. This has been present in our lives as followers of Jesus from the beginning for each of us. But we can never forget that it's always our responsibility not to lose sight of this truth.

Our responsibility is to love our fellow humans as Jesus taught us. We cannot call ourselves Christians if we do anything else. Many do, I agree, but nothing could be further from God's truth. The question for us now, then, as individuals and as members and friends of this church community is how we do this work of making Jesus' teachings – this great commission God has given us – real to the world outside our doors, especially in these days when church has been pushed to the sidelines of our culture and our communities. Perhaps, knowing what we now know, churches deserved to be pushed, shoved really, into new awakenings as to our purpose and our call. And that, dear ones, is what is so very exciting about being church today, right here and right now. We in our church are in the midst of a time of new beginnings as we engage more deeply with the Threshold process in the new year coming. God is on the move here and we are about to engage in the process of discerning, figuring out together, just what that means for us now and in the future. That is an amazing and incredible gift, one that can't be gift wrapped or slid under the Christmas tree. But it can, and it will, reveal God's future breaking forth in our midst. I can't wait and I hope you feel the same! Amen.